

SCHEMING WAYS: PREPARING LOWER LEVEL EFL LEARNERS TO INTERACT WITH LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This article supports the position that language-based approaches to literary texts can make literature relevant to the needs of lower level learners. It is argued that well-selected texts and materials can provide immensely stimulating curriculum content, which provides an excellent basis for developing thought-provoking, interactive and imaginative activities for students. However, the principal focus here is the importance of eliciting / supplementing the background knowledge, or schemata, which students require to engage with texts. It is seen as particularly important that foreign students, studying in countries where English is not the first language of communication, and who draw on very different socio-cultural background knowledge and personal experiences to that of a Western writer, should be supported in applying the cultural awareness that the writer assumes from the reader. The difficulty of a text is therefore seen as a function of a wider set of factors than surface linguistic ones. The implications of a schema based model of the reading process for the study of literature in ELT are discussed. Practical suggestions for preparing students to engage with a literary text are put forward. Finally, part of a poem by Tony Harrison, *Long Distance II*, is analysed from a pedagogic point of view. The intention is to illustrate an approach and associated activities which take full account of the need to develop and involve foreign students' background knowledge and experience, in order to enable them to access the dimensions of a text which are of universal interest and appeal.

KEY WORDS

Schema, Background knowledge, thematic approach, cultural awareness, language-based materials, text reconstruction.

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RESUMEN

La aproximación lingüística a textos literarios puede hacer de la literatura un útil instrumento en la enseñanza del inglés en niveles básicos. Bien seleccionados, los textos y materiales pueden aportar un contenido curricular que motive al estudiante y le sirva de valioso punto de referencia para el desarrollo de actividades reflexivas, interactivas e imaginativas. Este artículo, sin embargo, se centra especialmente en la necesidad de facilitar al estudiante el conocimiento de fondo, o “schemata”, que necesita para poder enfrentarse a textos literarios. El estudiante extranjero, que estudia inglés donde éste no es la primera lengua de comunicación y cuyos conocimientos socioculturales y experiencias personales difieren de las de un escritor occidental, precisa un apoyo especial a la hora de incorporar la conciencia cultural que el escritor supone en su lector. La dificultad de un texto sobrepasa por tanto el nivel meramente lingüístico para integrarse en un conjunto de factores más amplios. De ahí proviene la importancia de enseñarles un modelo de lectura de textos literarios basado en esquemas culturales, que incorpore sugerencias prácticas de apoyo en el enfrentamiento a dichos textos. En este sentido, y desde una perspectiva pedagógica, se analiza parte de un poema de Tony Harrison, *Long Distance II*. Con esto se intenta ilustrar un tipo de aproximación que desarrolle y al mismo tiempo integre el conocimiento de fondo y las experiencias de dichos estudiantes en su camino de percepción de las dimensiones de un texto cuyo atractivo e interés son universales.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Esquema, conocimiento de fondo, enfoque temático, conciencia cultural, materiales basados en la lengua, reconstrucción textual.

RÉSUMÉ

Selon l'auteur, une approche linguistique du texte littéraire peut répondre aux besoins des étudiants de langue à tous les niveaux. Des textes littéraires soigneusement choisis peuvent enrichir les programmes et servir de base à des activités qui stimulent la réflexion, l'imagination et l'interaction chez les étudiants. Le thème central de l'article est l'importance de la connaissance schématique et culturelle pour aborder le texte littéraire. Cela est particulièrement important pour les étudiants des pays non-anglophones qui disposent souvent d'une expérience et d'une conscience socio-culturelle différentes de celles que l'auteur présuppose chez les lecteurs. La difficulté du texte littéraire dépend donc de facteurs qui ne sont pas seulement d'ordre linguistique. L'auteur discute les implications d'un modèle de lecture basé sur la connaissance schématique pour l'étude de la littérature et pour l'enseignement de l'anglais. Il propose aussi des suggestions pratiques pour préparer l'étudiant à aborder le texte littéraire. Enfin, l'auteur fait une analyse pédagogique d'un extrait du poème de Tony Harrison, *Long Distance II*, afin d'illustrer une approche du

texte et des matériels qui permettent les étudiants d'accéder aux dimensions universelles et intéressantes du texte.

MOTS-CLÉ

Connaissance schématique, connaissance socio-culturelle, approche thématique, conscience culturelle, matériels pour une étude linguistique des textes littéraires, reconstruction textuelles.

LITERATURE FOR LOWER LEVEL EFL STUDENTS?

Over the past decade a convincing case has been made for the inclusion of literary texts in ELT curricula. Carter (p. 96) reminds us that literary texts need not be reserved for use with more advanced students in order to develop higher order critical skills, such as appreciation of the socio-cultural perspective of an author - their content can equally validly be exploited to create stimulating language development and awareness raising activities for intermediate/lower-intermediate level learners of English. Carter stresses that a language-based approach to literature geared towards lower level learners will frequently involve applying familiar ELT activity types, such as prediction, cloze and jumbled reading tasks, in order to not only provoke engagement with a selected poem or prose extract, but also develop students' reading skills and sensitivity to selected linguistic features of different types of literary texts. Meanwhile, McRae (pp. 91, 96) has argued persuasively for the use of literary and other non-information types of texts with all levels of language students, on the grounds that what he terms 'representational materials' have the ability to engage students' imaginative and cognitive faculties, thereby adding an important interactive dimension to the ELT curriculum.

Language-based approaches can tap, then, the potential of literature to provide thought-provoking and interesting materials without launching into a full study of literature as a subject with all the critical baggage that naturally entails (though that type of study can be provided for those students who attain proficiency level). However, with the lower level students whose needs this article is concerned, the main objective will naturally be to provide ways in to a basic understanding of the context, characters, events, themes, emotions and viewpoints that the text provides. Interaction with the text at these levels will, of course, also provide excellent conditions for developing students' more general reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking skills.

The need to develop coherent approaches to literary text study for lower level learners must be given high priority, given the apparent reluctance of many ELT teachers to use literature with lower level learners, and the fact that the majority of course materials seem to be pitched towards more advanced level students (Preran, 2000). A familiar mix of pre-/while-/post-reading questions is used in most sound interactive EFL collections designed to guide adult and younger learners towards a meaningful reading experience (e.g. *Chapter & Verse*, McRae & Pantaleón, p. 91; *Voices in Literature*, McCloskey & Stack, p. 96). Questions and activities for lower level students must, as these collections illustrate, be carefully selected so as to encourage and support the reading and response process without turning the whole experience into another set of exercises for the poor student to plough through mechanically. Any text tasks must have a clear purpose in terms of development of reading skills or enhancing students' interest in reading imaginative texts. The point of entry for uncovering dimensions of the text will often be particular linguistic features, such as choice of lexis, register or pronoun related to a switch of viewpoint. Such an approach to texts has been shown to be equally relevant to texts selected from new literary sources as it is to traditional British and American texts (see Vethamani, p. 96).

An interesting feature of language-based materials is activities that involve personal response to the ideas, images and emotions communicated via the texts. Such personalisation can be effected by eliciting memories and experiences relevant to the theme prior to an encounter with the text, or post-reading questions that call on the learner to articulate their reaction to, say, the characters and their actions. Rewriting activities can involve textual intervention (Pope, p. 95) to produce an alternative ending or write the text in a different style. More imaginative and less tightly text focused extension tasks might involve asking students to create a dialogue incorporating characters and emotional relationships from a short story which has already been exploited via a more typical set of questions about the plot and the characters.

The ongoing interest in literature in the context of teaching language to all levels of students can to a large degree be attributed to current concerns about course content. On many international, tertiary level ELT programmes, there is an increasing concern to develop courses that offer more than the bland topics and limited characters and lifestyles served up by most general coursebooks. There is a new desire to select course materials that tackle global themes and serious topics

which relate to important aspects of people's lives (see, for example, *North Star: Focus on Reading & Writing, Intermediate*, Sardinas & DuPaquier, p. 98). A thematic approach can provide fertile ground to develop interactive language and thinking skills for students at all levels.. Literature can make a vital contribution to this thematic agenda, as it clearly relates to the content of people's lives in imaginative, stimulating ways. Seamus Heaney, in a recent interview*, reminded us that literature is so attractive because it provides great pleasure and moves us emotionally. For this reason, it is a very powerful resource which can promote language learning. Also as Preran (2000) points out, it involves learners as people with feelings and responses, thereby connecting with their inner lives.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

However, the inclusion of more substantial, representative text material does require more careful pedagogic structuring. The need to prepare students for their encounter with the text becomes even more vital when the texts call for engagement at different levels, not just mechanical extraction of key facts and ideas. Students need to be primed to deal with the themes, emotions, characters, settings, social and cultural understandings etc. that the text calls into play. For example, students living in relatively stable and peaceful societies, which have not been through major wars in their recent past, may need considerable historical, social and emotional preparation to be able to appreciate the contexts and experiences that result in the bitter emotional tone of a Wilfred Owen poem, such as *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, with its startling opening lines:

*What passing-bells for those who die as cattle
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns*

The necessary pre-reading awareness raising might be achieved by using documentary footage from the First World War, or period photographs, to help students understand the poet's anger and choice of imagery.

The importance of eliciting personal experience and ensuring a learner grasp of vital background knowledge becomes even more crucial when teaching English in an overseas setting. It is quite frequently the

* Interview in *The Sunday Times*, reported in a *Gulf News* article of the 13.2.2000.

case that certain socio-cultural aspects of the text may be unfamiliar to students. Steps taken via text warm-up/preparation activities to enhance background knowledge can make texts more imaginatively and intellectually accessible, and render them more useful and interesting as course readings. Most Middle East or Asian groups of students who had not lived in Europe or the US, might, for example, need to be made aware of the use of the term the “Old Masters” to refer to classic painters like Rembrandt and Breughel, whose famous painting, *Icarus*, and the scene it depicts, is a key point of departure for the ideas developed in the poem by W. H. Auden, *Musee des Beaux Arts*. Text preparation work which discussed the work of the classic painters and involved students in viewing and discussing this actual picture would, of course, help students immensely to understand the Auden poem.

The need to carefully prepare the foreign learner for imaginative texts accords well with the essence of schema theory as it relates to reading as an interactive process (see Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988, for a useful synopsis of schema theory). The essence of schema theory is that pre-existing fields of knowledge are activated in the processing of any text. This conceptual knowledge will include knowledge of socio-cultural conventions, attitudes and behaviours associated with different areas of experiences. The ability to activate appropriate fields of knowledge is therefore a vital necessity for engagement with any literary text. Now, as pointed out above, EFL students, particularly those studying overseas, may, as a results of different cultural experiences and influences, have developed equally valid, but nevertheless different sets of schemata to those assumed by Western writers. This situation has a number of very important implications for the teaching of literature to EFL students:

- Texts may be difficult for students, not principally because of their linguistic difficulty, but because their different social cultural and affective schema do not empower them adequately to recreate and interact with the writer’s discourse.
- Our pedagogic activities should provide the necessary thematic, cultural and linguistic preparation and/or supplement, so as to make literary texts accessible. However, the desire to ensure that students have adequate background knowledge should not result in selection of texts for study which only draw on situations and contexts which are familiar to students. Part of the agenda of literary study is always to extend horizons and make learners use their imagination. What is

important is that students should be able to engage with a text at a cognitive and emotional level. Therefore, texts will need to be selected thematically to suit students' age and range of life experiences. Cultural constraints regarding what topics can be discussed comfortably in different international educational settings should also be taken into account. For example, a text dealing with an adulterous relationship could be problematic in some school or tertiary teaching situations. If literature is to be more widely integrated into ELT curricula, then students must be able to discuss and respond to it freely.

- The reader's background knowledge is an extremely important part of the reading process and can even compensate for learners' linguistic deficiencies, such as problems with lexis or syntax. It is crucial to the prediction and inference making processes that are so vital for dealing for reading poetry, where there is generally so little redundancy, and the poet tries to get maximum semantic mileage from each word.

Actual preparatory text engagement activities to elicit/build background knowledge will only be successful if they can connect to the experience of students in interesting ways. As stressed in a recent *ELTJ* survey of books on the teaching of literature (Paran, 2000), it is vital, too, to ensure that the activity type fits the texts and aids the process of uncovering its meanings. The possibilities for actual activities are numerous, but will typically include:

1. Using pictures or a short video sequence to stimulate thought or discussion relevant to the theme of the text or the situation of the characters.
2. Asking students to find out about a particular place, period of history, famous person, city, artist etc. that is highly relevant to the content of the text.
3. Getting students to read non-literary texts related to a central theme of the text to be studied, in order to develop the awareness needed to understand it fully. For example, a letter from a soldier to his girlfriend or parents from the war front, might provide an appropriate way in to the Wilfred Owen poem, *Anthem For Doomed Youth*, already referred to above.
4. Get students to discuss personal experiences of an emotion that is at the core of a literary text. For example, students might recount experiences of receiving shocking news before reading Raymond Carver's poem, *What The Doctor Told Me*, in which the poet describes his

reaction to being informed by a doctor that he is suffering from lung cancer.

5. Direct focus on particular socio-cultural conventions, contexts or references that are crucial for understanding the impact of the text.

6. Focus on possibly problematic lexical, syntactic, register features of a text at an early stage, so as to ensure students will not find a text too demanding on first reading.

7. Use a short extract from the text for a text reconstruction activity, such as putting parts of a text into a correct order, so as to ease the students in to the text via a task that will make them familiar with some part of the situation. The activity also serves to familiarise them with the language of the text without requiring them to deal with its deeper levels of meaning.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR *LONG DISTANCE II*

In order to illustrate the type of extended preparatory text approach that focuses on activation/supplementation of the background knowledge that the EFL learner needs to interact with a literary text, I have selected the second part of a poem, *Long Distance*, by Tony Harrison (see Appendix), which I have used successfully with students and teachers in training in different countries. The poem uses contemporary language forms and does not confront the reader with difficult lexis. It deals with close family relationships - a theme that students around the globe can definitely relate to, even though the situation of isolation that the characters find themselves in may be more unfamiliar in non-Western societies. However, the emotional impact of the poem is one which certainly has universal valence. Importantly, too, from an international teaching perspective, the text does not contain content or scenes which could be potentially embarrassing for students to discuss or respond to in more culturally conservative/traditional classroom settings.

In the poem itself, a father's enduring need and love for his wife is observed through the eyes of his son. We see the father's total inability to come to terms with her death. Our exposure to his attempts to carry on as if she were still alive take us into the emotional territory of reactions to the loss of a close and much loved relative. A valid way in to the theme of this text, would be to get students to discuss in groups the most happily married real or fictional couples they know,

and pool lists of the features of these couples' lives and personalities. They might then read a magazine article about happily married Western or international couples with children, to see whether their stable relationships were based on the same qualities as had been brainstormed. The first task obviously aims to elicit the kind of schematic awareness about married life relevant to the poem, while the role of the magazine articles would be to bring to students' minds aspects of a solid, affectionate marriage so they can connect with the plight of the father and son in the text.

At the next stage, students might be asked to do a text reconstruction activity, such as a cloze with the rhyming words at the end of lines 3 and four of each verse omitted, with students being asked to select the correct words from a list: *bed, pass, alone, crime, grief, tea, name, call* to reconstruct the full poem. Besides alerting students to the rhyme pattern, and making them aware of the simplicity of the vocabulary, the activity also alerts them to the change of rhyming pattern in the last verse, which reflects an important change of direction in the poem –something which can be explored with students later. Another benefit is that the activity provides a motivating way in to the poem without burdening the text with lots of questions when the students first meet it.

After this, some of the vocabulary items expressions which are very loaded in terms of the poem's cultural and social context can be made clear for the students. The harsh north of England climate, domestic routines in badly heated houses and the traditional roles of men and women in lower middle and working class homes in the 1950's and 60's pervade references to putting hot water bottles in beds, keeping slippers warm and renewing transport passes in verse 1. The reference to being able to "drop in" has deep resonances in relation to close communities where families and neighbours were friendly and supportive. It is also important to explore the way that the first line of verse 2, "I believe life ends with death, and that is all." should be interpreted in the light of the fact that most people in the UK have no strong belief in religion or life after death, since that situation contrasts dramatically with that in many countries around the world where English is studied. This awareness can help students eventually appreciate how the poet's lack of belief leaves him so emotionally devastated by the loss of his parents and in need of communicating with them.

Once some of the cultural references in the text have been elucidated, the students can move on to a reading of the poem, with the support and guide of key questions which direct them to recovering and applying background knowledge. At the same time, attention is drawn to particular features of the text which allow them to apply their inferential powers most effectively in order to get at the different levels of meanings in the text. The questions which are suggested and discussed below do not by any means exhaust the poem's potential. Rather, they are intended to illustrate the way in which we help language learners to interact with a text and develop the kinds of reading/thinking skills which make reading imaginative texts valuable and pleasurable.

Who is talking in verse 1?

In verse 1, it is vital that students infer that the poem is being narrated from the viewpoint of the son. The possessive pronoun in "my mother", of course, establishes this, as does the reference to "Dad", while the different register is revealing in terms of his relationship with his father.

In verse 1, how do we know the father cared a lot about his wife?

This question forces students to examine the three routines that the father continues to carry out for his wife in relation to what they know about the varied ways in which people can react to the loss of a partner. The discussion of these actions will establish the basic context for reacting to the rest of the poem. The pre-reading preparation activities will hopefully lead students, too, to pointing out that the actions the father performs would have been the duties of a wife rather than a husband in a traditional marital relationship.

In verse 2, who has to phone and why?

This question is designed to make the student realise how the first line echoes the direct speech of the father, marked by the use of "You", for whom the only possible referend is the son. It then makes them think about why the father has to "clear away her things" and "look alone". Such a process of unpacking the situation may be begun by simply asking the students to say who "her" refers to.

Why is the father's love described as "raw" and a "crime" in the last line of verse 2?

This question allows us to explore with students the normal associations of these words and their shock value in this context. The phrase "raw love" is a particularly powerful combination of words that helps students see how words can be used to achieve surprising effects in a poem. It should provide, too, a starting point to get students to think about the normal cultural assumptions about the nature of the loving relationship between an old couple, particularly an elderly couple who have grown-up children. Discussion of the word "crime" and its normal connotations should force students to realise that the father is aware of his actions and is afraid of how others, including his son, will judge his behaviour. The discomfort of the old man's situation can be made real to the students by asking them to think of situations they have known where it has been necessary to "clear away things" (see verse 2, line 3).

In what physical and mental situation do we see the father in verse 3?

This question requires the students to draw on schemata related to domestic routines and relationships between close family members. These are necessary to imaginatively construct the situation in which the father waits ("sure that very soon he'd hear her key") for his wife to return ("she'd just popped out to get his tea"). At the same time, key words and phrases make it clear that he is deluding himself: "disbelief", "*knew* she'd just popped out". The attention that the text draws linguistically to significant words, such as "*knew*", provide us with a very obvious way of raising the issue of the father's inability to deal with the reality of his wife's death.

Who is speaking in the last verse, and who is he talking to?

This question directs students to the vital realisation that the son is now faced with the death of both his parents ("You haven't both gone shopping") This could be approached by focusing on the significance of the full description of the "new black leather phone book" and mention of "the disconnected number I still call". This can lead to the students making the inference that the son's behaviour is paralleling that of his father when he, too, carried on as if a death had not occurred.

Finally, the title of the piece, *Long Distance II*, can be a useful spring-board to discussing the total dramatic and emotional situation that has been established by the end of the poem –getting students to suggest an alternative title usually proves to be a highly successful and revealing activity!

The set of questions discussed above, and the preceding sequence of preparatory activities, illustrate how we can support lower level learners in approaching a literary text. Obviously, the final selection of activities and their sequencing will depend on the nature of the course and the needs of particular groups of students, but hopefully those presented here do give an idea of how we can encourage students to uncover the characters, events and basic emotional terrain of a text, by fully activating relevant schema and personal experience. The recommended line of questioning and discussion leaves open the option to proceed to more ambitious text exploitation work if this is envisaged in a course's objectives. Options could include: more intensive focus on stylistic features, such as choice of lexis; more ambitious rewriting activities, such as creating a dialogue for a scene like the son 'dropping in' to see his father; higher level critical interpretation of the intentions of the writer in psychological and cultural terms; more open personal response to the text in terms of the memories and situations which the text brings to the student's mind; intertextual work involving reading and analysis of other texts which deal with a related topic.

Whatever our ultimate goal in terms of exploitation of a literary text, it is essential that we first of all create the conditions for our EFL learners to gain access to its core concerns and range of possible meanings. For this to happen, it is vital they draw on suitable schematic knowledge and personal experience. - we must equip them with *Scheming Ways*!

APPENDIX

Long Distance II

Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
put hot water bottles her side of the bed
and still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
to clear away her things and look alone

as though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He *knew* she's just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,
in my new black leather phone book there's your name
and the disconnected number I still call.

Tony Harrison

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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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