

Understanding Cultural Context in Responding to Literature: Researching the Teaching of Literature in EFL Classroom Context

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Abstract

This paper shares some insights into the notion of having EFL students collectively respond to literature. Understanding and appreciating a piece of literature is determined by how one can convey the concepts and words to new situations. During this process, several types of interaction happen: interaction between experience and the text, interaction between author's culture and reader, and interaction of the reader with other readers. In order to interpret a text in the way the author has intended, readers need to develop knowledge of the author's cultural and historical contexts. This paper describes several innovative, interactive methods that will help students make connections between life experiences and literary texts, between the author's culture and their own, and between their ideas and those of other readers.

Keywords: literature, response, cultural context, interaction

1. Introduction

Reading a work of literature requires a special competence since this activity involves many different aspects and strategies. The aspects could be varied in their practical implementation since they may be influenced by external and internal problems within an institution, students' intake, and curricular support. Discussing strategies for exercising the implementation of an effective literature curriculum will boost teachers' pedagogical competence, enhance the use of learning materials, and aid teachers in classroom management.

In literature-based language teaching, competence in reading is central to the students' ability to engage in classroom interaction. In reading a work of literature in an EFL classroom students must understand that the cultural context in which the piece of work was written is the first stepping stone to understanding a text's overarching themes. Just understanding the cultural context is the first stepping stone to understanding a text, understanding the theory that undergirds reading comprehension, particularly the elements of interaction that render a particular interpretation of a text, is vital to setting up an effective curriculum for studying English literature. Once the theoretical foundation is laid, teachers can explore practical, innovative applications of the theory in the teaching of literature.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

When readers approach a text, there are three types of interaction that come into play: the interaction of the readers' life experience and the text, the interaction of the author's culture and the text, and the interaction of the reader with other readers. These processes work together to render a plausible interpretation of any text, but is especially important when considering the interpretation of literary texts written in a language and culture that is a different from the reader's language and culture.

2.1 *The Interaction Between Life Experience and Textual Interpretation*

The life experience and the knowledge readers bring to a text play a significant role in their interpretation of the text. Even when a person comprehends one hundred percent of the words in the text, the inferences and interpretations involved in comprehension can produce very different insights. Amelia Bedelia (Parish, 1963), a

domestic worker in a children's storybook, demonstrates how this could be. On her first day of work, Amelia Bedelia, was given a list of tasks to carry out while her mistress was out. Three of the tasks were to draw the drapes, to dust the furniture, and to change the towels in the bathroom. Amelia drew a picture of the curtains, threw dusting powder all over the room, and changed the towels by cutting them to form new shapes. She was confused when, rather than praising her artistic ability, the mistress of the house spoke harshly to her about letting the furniture fade, and was angry at the dust in the room and the changes that Amelia had made to the towels in the bathroom.

Two major theories have dominated research and thought about what happens when one reads. The traditional thinkers focused on vocabulary as they described reading as figuring out the meaning of the words and putting them together to figure out the meaning of the text. Other researchers have proposed that readers have their own set of ideas and experience that they recall in order to interpret the text. Carrell, Devine, and Eskey (1989) surmised that these two processes interacted with each other. Readers simultaneously figure out the meaning of the words and make connections between what they believe the author has said and their own experiences.

To illustrate the role that life experience plays in the interpretation of a text, let us consider the following example. The interpretation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by the teenager whose parents have forbidden her to see her beloved would be quite different from that of the young bride who was able to marry the groom of her own choosing. In the same way, a British teenager who had visited Shakespeare's house or toured a stage in which Shakespeare's dramas had first been presented would be able to make more connections and perhaps have a deeper appreciation of the text than college students who had never traveled beyond the borders of their homeland.

2.2 *The Interaction Between the Reader and the Author's Culture*

When understanding a literary work from another culture, the ability to make inferences and interpretations play an even greater role in one's insight and appreciation of the text. Not only may some of the words be unknown, but the predictions and concepts that the authors have made when writing the text may not be provided to the reader. Anyone who has lost concentration when reading and read a paragraph over and over again will recognize that passive reading is not efficient. Even if one could take in all the information in the first glance and store it in memory, it would not be enough to fully understand and appreciate a piece of work. Understanding and appreciation of a piece of work are shown by how one can convey the concepts and words to new situations.

When Johnny 5 from *Short Circuit* (Wilson & Maddock, 1986) a robot who has the information from hundreds of books in memory, tries to help his creator to try to persuade a girlfriend to marry him, he uses many idiomatic phrases inappropriately. He may have hundreds of words and sentences stored in memory, but because he does not know the context in which certain words and phrases can be used, he cannot use the words and sentences in original situations. The result of stringing together words out of their cultural context was a message that confused the girl so much that she did not understand what the computer engineer meant. It is not enough to just memorize the words when reading; to understand and appreciate literature, the reader must be able to interpret the words within their literary and cultural context.

The importance of understanding words in their cultural context is further illustrated in a study by Reynolds et al. (1982). The researchers gave Anglo-American and African-American students a letter written by an African-American student about a cultural ritual called a sounding. In the letter, a boy tells about a situation that occurred in the school cafeteria. After describing the exchange of insults he had with his friend, he wrote, "We really got into it then. After a while, many people got involved--4, 5, then 6. It was a riot." After the gym teacher "settled things down", the boys were sent to the principal, who expelled them for a week and called their parents. While the Anglo-Americans had no experience with sounding, African-Americans knew it as a form of insult. African American students interpreted the event as a playful exchange of insults. Anglo-Americans assumed the letter was about a fight. Phrases like "it was a riot" and "really got into it" and the consequences of the event were consistent with "sounding," and a physical fight. Because they lacked experience with soundings, the Anglo-Americans did not properly interpret the letter.

Although this study does not explore students' interaction with literary novels, the principles are still true. Readers' experience and cultural background influence their interpretation of both the words and the concepts in the text. Thus, in order to interpret a text in the way that the author intended and to avoid the disastrous, albeit humorous responses to texts like those made by Amelia Bedelia and Johnny 5, readers need to expand their knowledge of the author's culture.

2.3 The Interaction of Readers With Other Readers

A third type of interaction that augments a reader's interpretation of the text occurs with other readers. Howard (2010) claims that students' active engagement in discussing the problems in literary works, which he calls 'transaction with a text', will lead to the construction of new, alternative perspectives of the literature being discussed. Readers who accomplish something related to what they are reading, whether it is applying, analyzing, appreciating, or evaluating their interpretation of the literary text, will have a richer understanding and deeper appreciation for what they have read. The aim of the interactive techniques for teaching literature is to help readers from other languages and cultures be more efficient in interpreting English literature and gaining a deeper insight of both the language and the cultural values in English literary works.

Literature classes have been introducing students to literary concepts and literary elements for many years, but some students have found it somewhat difficult to fully understand the meaning. This difficulty may stem from the way in which students are introduced to literature. Often they are required to take notes while the professor points out all the qualities of the text.

An alternative method would be to help students learn how to interpret and experience the text for themselves. Through projects and role plays based on the texts given by the teachers, students would learn how to recognize connections, research contrasts, and respond in their own unique way to the text.

Helping students actively and interactively respond to texts in their own unique way requires collaboration and creativity. Interactive approaches necessitate a dialog among students and between the students and the teacher. Creativity helps generate interest in the texts and encourages students to dig deeper into their own experience and the cultural context of the author.

3. Applying the Theory

When readers engage in the reading and appreciation of literature, they go through several stages of interpretation. The first stage is recognition and recall. Readers broaden their experience as they learn to recognize the words, ideas, structure, and purpose of the text. In this stage, it is critical for readers to think about what the author means. In the second stage, readers explore the cultural context; through such activities analyzing the author's style, investigating the social issues and events of the time that the text was written, or comparing the text to other texts. In the third stage, readers respond to the text; considering how to connect their own life experience to that of the literary text. During this process, the threetypes of interaction occur simultaneously.

3.1 Broadening Experience Through Research

One way to broaden one's experience in order to understand the words of a text is to conduct research. Effective research begins with a specific question or purpose. For readers to increase their understanding of a literary text, they need to observe decisions that the author has made not only about the content of the masterpiece, but also the technique. Active readers will examine the author's decisions regarding word choice, the form of the text, and the use of literary devices. Through this type of "transaction" (Rosenblatt, 1995), readers build a deeper understanding of the author's culture and a closer relationship to the text. Sumara (2002) asserts that engaging with literary texts is a focal practice that may arouse deep meaning and personal understanding.

Words in English can be very tricky. When used in one situation, a word may have one meaning; in another situation, it might have an entirely different meaning. For example, when Amelia Bedelia's employer told her to draw the drapes, she meant for her to close them. If Amelia Bedelia had been in an art class and her teacher told her to draw the drapes, it would have been appropriate for Amelia to get out a pencil and sketchpad. In literature, similar processes can confuse the reader. The same word in a 15th-century text and a 20th-century text may have different meanings. To find out if a word has changed its meaning requires research.

Authors are often very careful about the words that they use when writing. They may put words together because they sound beautiful. They may choose an easier word because of their audience. They may choose a more complex word because the subtle shades of its meaning are more accurate. A word may be chosen because of how it will make the reader feel. Word choice is more difficult to research, but one can glean a few clues about the author's choice of words by researching the author's purpose for writing and the intended audience. A closer examination of the genre of the work will help the reader decide if it is fiction or non-fiction. The exploration of these forms will also familiarize readers with some of the vocabulary and background knowledge that they need in order to research contrasts of various texts and their experience.

Howard (2010) suggests that when students research the connections between their life experiences and the text and contrasts of the text with other texts from the same time period, students can interpret a text in the way that

is close to what the author intended.

3.2 Exploring the Author's Culture

If a person is truly thinking about the message in the pages he is reading and recognizes that message as coming from someone else, then the first step of interaction with the author has begun. Readers who recognize that authors write with a certain purpose and are perhaps reacting to the social and cultural issues of their times will ask themselves questions while they read. For the sensitive reader of literature, the line of questions might be as follows: "What values, motivation, and priorities do I, the reader, share with the author?"; "How are we different?"; "To what extent does the author's cultural background influence the decisions that he or she has made concerning word choice, the use of literary devices, and genre?"; and "How do these choices affect the way that I feel about the text?". A potential barrier to understanding literature is its age. With all but contemporary literature, the author has lived in a different era and possibly a different culture and, thus, has responded to a set of cultural and social issues that the reader's generation has already resolved. For this reason, in order to understand the text, it becomes important to identify the values, priorities, and motivations of the author and somehow link the themes that transcend time and are common to the human experience to our own experience.

Cultural values may create a challenge in interpreting texts, especially when the author and reader are from two different cultures. An example of clashing cultural values that one might encounter while reading literature is connected to the value of the words themselves. Tang (2006) asserts that Americans place great value on words as conveyers of fact while Chinese put more emphasis on action. For Chinese, the truth is in the action, not necessarily the words. Thus, for intercultural readers it is not enough just to know the glosses for various words or even appropriate and inappropriate behaviors; to understand the deep meaning of culture, intercultural reader must seek out a solid understanding of the cultural implications of those behaviors.

How can intercultural readers acquire the cultural rules and values of the host community and even begin to understand the cultural implications of their behaviors? First, they must realize that theirs is not the only relevant worldview; they possess an alternative logic to that of the author. If they want to comprehend the cultural implications of the language, intercultural readers must value, though not necessarily embrace, the author's perspective (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2001; Elmer, 1993).

Second, an understanding of cultural rules and values is best achieved through constant exposure. If they want to increase their understanding of the culture and their fluency in the language, intercultural readers should engage in Parallel Reading (Collie & Slater, 2012), an activity in which readers familiarize themselves with several texts that were written at roughly the same time. This helps readers understand the social, political, and cultural context.

The geographical distance between Eastern readers and Western authors is great; literature offers a way to narrow that gap. When an author moves a reader to excitement or anger, for some it sparks the need to respond, particularly when reading is regarded as active communication rather than a passive activity.

With the expansion of the internet, opportunities to communicate with the author have increased. Some contemporary authors have websites on which the readers might post notes. Others invite readers to subscribe to their email list. Students may also respond to an author writing a review of the book. Many online booksellers make this an integral part of their website. Book reviews typically explore the writer's technique and use of literary devices as well as respond to some of the values, goals, and themes that the author wrote about.

Another type of response, which works better with non-fiction but could still be used with fiction, poetry, or drama, is a position paper or a letter to the editor. In non-fiction, when the author's intent is to argue against a social evil of the day, writing a letter to the editor or an essay expressing the other side of the debate has a clear form. With other forms of more creative literature, the challenge to respond to the injustices may be a little more difficult; yet writing a reaction would drive the reader to a deeper understanding of the concepts and cultural assumptions that the author has set forth.

3.3 Responding Collectively to Texts

Perhaps the most natural way of communicating the interaction of the text and experience is by talking to other readers. After reading a good book, readers will often turn to their friends and ask them if they have read the book. More formal ways of structuring these experience for the classroom would be to have students interview each other or to review and give recommendations for good books for their friends. Another useful activity that can help readers think about the connections of their own experience to what they are reading is illustrations.

Several types of responses can help readers share the connections and contrasts between their experience and their interpretation of the literary texts. Once in a literature class that one of the authors conducted, while reading

of a character who had to choose between potential boyfriends, a group of students was taught the rules of an American game show, *The Dating Game*. The teacher asked six students to play the game as if they were the characters from the book. The game made the students read the book a little more carefully.

Similar activities that challenge readers to share their interactions with the text include visual art. Readers may draw pictures or find pictures to illustrate what they are reading. These illustrations may also take the form of story maps, comic strips, or home videos.

Another activity which encourages readers to think of the text more deeply is an activity which we call *Scribal Interpreter*. In this activity, the reader revises the text by changing one of its features. This is not a new activity; movie directors have been doing it for years. For example, in the 1960's, Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise altered the setting of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* from 17th century England to 20th century New York. The plot and characters of *West Side Story* are the same as those of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The producers of *West Side Story* even attempted to preserve the poetic form of the text by setting the dialog to music. An added challenge for *Scribal Interpreters* would be to maintain the exact meter and rhyme schemes in the text even when changing some of the words in order to match the new setting.

Kindergarten teachers have long relied on the activity of "Show and Tell." In this activity, the students bring something to show to the class and tell their classmates about it. Through such an activity, kindergartens learn to socialize with other people. In literature circles, the same kind of activity, sharing a story or a poem that one has read, increases readers' interaction with other readers and, at the same time reinforces the knowledge they have acquired and the enjoyment they have gained in their interaction with the text. *Literary show and tell* (Capitalize: *Literary Show and Tell*) helps readers form connections, find contrasts, and forge new contexts. Sharing experience with others can be very rewarding for the reader. As readers share what they have read, they begin to see more connections in the book. Through discussion with other readers, they may even see connections between events or characters that they themselves did not make on their own. The sharing also encourages connections between the readers themselves, building their relationships.

Sharing a book with other readers also opens one's mind about various contrasts that one might find in the book as well as interpretations that other readers got out of the book. For example, recently, when a person was quite befuddled by a story that has been read before, he shared the story with his colleague. He knew very little about the author other than his name. As he talked to his colleague, who had not read the story, but was familiar with the author, the information that he gave about the author and the context of the writing helped him to form another perspective on the story.

Interacting with other readers could be the most fun part of reading a text, or the most boring. When readers are first introduced to literature, sharing books with their parents is exciting. Listening to a father and a mother read creates a secure, happy environment. When readers are in school, some teachers are good at fostering a love of reading and of literature. Reading a short, humorous plays with classmates each taking different roles is enjoyable. Writing an ending to an unfinished short story and sharing it with classmates is also fun. However, discussing a novel in which no one shows interest does not stimulate a love for literature. Listening to classmates give an oral report about their reading was neither fun nor interactive.

Reports about literature do not have to be passive and boring. They can be fun and interactive if the reading community is creative and engaging when organizing the forum for their presentation. For example, they might be a part of a literary conference or panel discussion where each reader analyzes and comments on a different aspect of a literary work. After their short presentation, the other readers ask questions. One does not need to wait until everyone has read a book to interact. An interaction may start with reading.

A reading community may engage in *reader's theater*, an activity in which the reading circle assigns a certain part of the text to each reader. For drama, the reading parts are clearly seen. Each reader would be assigned a character. For prose, readers may still take the part of various characters; the reading circle creating *reader's theatre* for this type of text just has an extra step of interpretation. In *reader's theatre*, there is no acting, only reading.

Acting and role play is another useful activity for bringing the reading community together while reading the literary work. Reading a text aloud, whether through *reader's theatre* or dramatization is a useful tool for helping readers hear the different voices and make connections between their own experience and the ideas in the text. Another way to create excitement in the shared experience is to engage in a collective response. Activities such as games, *reader's theatre*, and dramatization form a natural base for a collective response within the reading community since a number of readers are already involved in the experience.

Other activities that typically invite individual response to the text or author (e.g. illustrating a work, writing letters, writing literary critiques) could be designed as collaborative activities, thus creating a forum for a collective response. An element of competition might be added to the shared experience by choosing unbiased judges from the reading community to evaluate the interpretations and responses to the literary texts and their authors. They might evaluate certain qualities of the responses such as humor, tragedy, or romance and decide which of the responses was able to fulfill those qualities.

4. Benefits of Interactive Approaches to Literature

Literature gives students of English ample exercises in understanding the texts and the cultural contexts behind the works. Because literary works provide a variety of grammatical and lexical structures, careful readers who familiarize themselves with the nature of the language used in the works find literature a valuable tool for improving their skills in the English language. Even casual readers who pass their time enjoying a good English book will be rewarded by the effort they give to practicing and exposing themselves to English.

English words have shades of meaning that change depending on the context in which they are used. As we saw in the example of Amelia Bedelia, drawing the drapes could be the same as closing the curtains or sketching the curtains depending on the intention of the speaker. The more one reads the more one can notice words in various situations used by different people for different reasons. This enriches the vocabulary.

Much practice reading also leads to faster reading. Plausible interpretations of words and the correct shade of meaning implied by the word are much easier to access the 100th time that a reader encounters a word than it was on the first encounter.

In addition to speeding up the recognition process and giving readers a deeper knowledge, interactive approaches to literature can develop a broader perspective of the world. Through researching authors and thinking about the text that they have written, literary scholars increase their knowledge of the historical, cultural, political, and social issues of the day. Readers can begin to draw connections between what was happening in the author's world and what the author has recorded on paper. Interacting with the text and with fellow readers about a story or poem creates more opportunities to think about the text. This, in turn, leads to greater comprehension of the text as well as a deeper knowledge of the culture in which and for which the text was written.

5. Conclusion

Even on the rare occasion when a reader does recognize one hundred percent of the text being read, the intended meanings or conclusions and interpretations involved in comprehending the text can result in very different understandings of the text. The aim of this interactive approach to literature is to help readers or students from other languages and cultures to be more efficient in interpreting English literature and gaining a deeper appreciation of both the language and the cultural values in it. The proposed ideas can only be carried out when there is a synergy between teacher's creativity and students' active participation in the whole process or recognizing words and concepts, researching ideas related to the context, analyzing the author's style, investigating the social issues and events of the time that it was written, and comparing the text to other texts. Through this type of response to the text, readers are able to connect their own life experience to that of the literary text. During the process, students engage in three types of interactive processes simultaneously as they share with other readers the connections of the text with their life experience and their research regarding the author's culture. It should also be taken into account that background knowledge and vocabulary will involve not only the ideas that the students may find in the text but also literary words and concepts to describe the form and style of the text they have to read. Through projects and role plays based on the literary texts, students learn how to recognize connections, research contrasts, and respond in their own unique way to the text.

Life experience and the knowledge readers bring to a text play a significant role in their interpretation of the text. Perhaps the most natural way of communicating the interpretation of the text and experiential lens they use in forming that interpretation is to sharing it with other readers. Thus, the teachers and the students who practice reading and responding to English literature also gain the ability to develop their communicative competence as they respond to contextual issues in the texts they are reading. Through interactive approaches to English literature, students exercise recognizing the words and ideas, spending time in reflection about the author's message and purpose, and responding publically to the texts they have read. This may assist them in faster word recognition, deeper knowledge of the world, a broader perspective of the world, and richer relationships in making sense of contextual features of a literary text.

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