

Literature Study in the “Global Village” Approaches to Enhance Personal Development and Promote Cultural Dialogue



Literature

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Abstract

The issues of syllabus design and text choice will become much less acute when/if we have designed an effective approach to study a literary text. I propose here an eclectic integrated approach combining in some astute manner the Personal Based Approach, the Language Based Approach and the Information Based Approach. The objective being to encourage in the student a thoughtful critical, interactive attitude to his text, to its structure and contents, to its technical and rhetorical elements as well as naturally to the explicit and/or implicit philosophical and ideological assumptions imbedded into it. Developing an attitude to a text in the learner is a means to enhance his/her personal development and promote cultural dialogue.

In this so called ‘Global Age’ of ours as the world is getting smaller every day as a result of new technological innovations that seem to erase all forms of barriers and boundaries, one essential question deserves consideration: are we, from now on, heading towards a more uniform, homogeneous world, shaped and potentially monitored by ‘dominant’, ‘invasive’, self-assertive powers and cultures, increasingly ‘expansive’, and likely to become overwhelming, or are we, as a “counteraction”, likely to witness a growing assertion of distinctive ethnic, autonomous entities and cultures keen to preserve their specificities and only too ready to promote and bring to the fore their own cultural norms, standards and values?

In the present international volatile context when information and communication in all fields are becoming important tools, not to say weapons, to be used, foreign language and literature teaching should assume more than ever before a vital role; and foreign language and literature departments in the so called third world are now urgently called on to re-assess their teaching strategies with regard to their language and literature teaching.

In this context, I would like to argue: literature teaching, wrongfully downgraded for some time in some third world educational institutions, should from now on assume a “revitalised” role; and therefore what to teach and, more importantly, *how* to teach it, have become more than ever before essential questions.

English literature for instance is not a product of our culture, but remains undeniably an agent of culture, and therefore there is some definite responsibility in designing pertinent literature syllabuses and approaches, and such academic questions as what to teach and how to teach it, conventional and traditional as they are, remain always of burning interest and actuality.

In English literature, if Shakespeare and Milton, for instance, rally around them an unquestionable degree of unanimity, because so universal in their message, (not to speak of their artistry), this unanimity becomes more problematic when it comes to say, the Metaphysical, or Cavalier poets of the 17th century, whose poeticising and carpe-diem worldview are comparatively more ‘idiosyncratic’ and as such, their inclusion in literature programmes more discussable.

Besides, Dickens and some 19th century social problem novelists do indeed rally around their works a fair amount of consensus, because they attempt to account for many of the social, economic and cultural disturbances of Britain during the Industrial Revolution; and with certain reserves and specifications, the experience of Britain then, is repeating itself now in so many developing countries with the problems of rural exodus, industrial squalor, poverty, etc. If for these reasons Dickens’s relevance and pertinence look self evident, is this a good enough reason to brush aside the novels of the Brontës and the human passions experienced in the Yorkshire Moors?

Are we to study the fiery ‘militant’ Sean O’Casey or the refined “aesthete” Oscar Wilde? Or again shall we propose to our students the poetry of Wilfrid Owen, who conveys to us the horrors of the First World War, or the more ‘gentle’ W.B. Yeats whose frame of reference is more markedly “classical” and “Christian” (i.e. alien to our students’ culture background and heritage.) These are only a few of the dilemmas facing English literature teachers and syllabus designers. But, I would like to argue that these dilemmas are to a certain extent, and in a sense fairly formal, because what is in my eyes more fundamentally important than syllabus design and text selection is the issue of **approach**. This is the gist of the present paper.

And indeed, beyond the issue of canonicity and the question of linguistic and cultural accessibility (that indeed remain important issues) what we should always heed in a literary text, and what becomes more crucial is the strategy or approach we choose to study this text.

To enhance personal development and promote cultural dialogue and “rapprochement”, I suggest opting for an eclectic integrated approach combining with varying degrees of emphasis and time allocation the three following approaches: The personal Response Based Approach, the Language Based Approach, and the Information Based Approach. A flexible combination of these

three approaches is to be modulated and adapted according to students' literary and linguistic competence, nature of text under study, class strength, teacher's priorities and prerogatives etc.

The Personal Response Based Approach is perhaps the approach that poses less problems, the more "spontaneous" approach so to speak, as it requires no evident erudite learning on the part of the students, and little specific preparation before coming to class.

This approach lays emphasis on the reader's immediate response (intellectual as much as emotional response) to the text. It gives the reader a free rein to his or her interpretation (within limits imposed from text naturally).

This approach involves the student personally, eliciting from him an immediate and "subjective" response about what the text "means" to him or her. It quickly frees the students, encourages them individually to talk and offer interpretations: makes them more forthcoming in their interaction with the text, gets them to talk **to**, and talk **with** the text, and many of its embedded cultural assumptions.

By reading into the writer's feelings and thoughts, his choices and designs, they communicate with his culture, and by so doing eventually communicate to him their **own** responses. Thus in this way, students are not passive, they are intellectually alert, exchanging through the teacher, ideas, suggestions and impressions; challenging one another, enjoying the pleasure of finding meaning into what on the surface might initially have looked dense, obscure, perhaps deterring.

For the study of poetry, I believe, this intuitive, speculative and "impressionistic" appreciation can lead more readily the student to personal intellectual and emotional fulfilment. It is a learner-centred approach (the teacher being there only to guide and encourage students' exchanges and reflections). It is an intellectually stimulating approach likely to induce students into some creative writing (writing pieces of poetry, short stories, or some such similar attempts).

Secondly, **The Language Based Approach** attends carefully to the **words** on the page, it develops in the students a more acute awareness of language usage versus language use, enhances the student's appreciation of functional versus aesthetic aspects of language. Through an examination of how language works to convey literary meaning, it is hoped this insight will develop tolerance of different ideas, through different thinking and, in the end, a more relativistic intellectual and cultural attitude.

In practical terms, this approach may be split into two phases:

- The first phase attends, to the mere **comprehension** of the text. Particular emphasis is laid first on the denotative aspect of language used in the text. It is primarily meant to sharpen the students' sense of the language, through problems of vocabulary usage, and, in so doing, develop, what is called, their "word attack skills", or how to tackle unfamiliar lexical items by using morphology of words, inference from text, or by using a dictionary etc. (Nutall pp.31-2).
- In the second and more important phase of this approach, we move from mere comprehension to **text analysis** and **interpretation**, and this is meant to enhance the students' "text attack skills" which is the process of interpreting a text as a whole, using all clues available in it including cohesion and rhetorical structure (Nutall Ch 7, 8). Here of course, we dwell more on the **connotative** dimension of language in a text.

This phase's clear objective is to elicit from students questions on the **hows** and **whys** of a text. In other words, it should bring into relief the passage from language usage to language use, making thus the move from text to discourse, from the functional to the aesthetic aspect of language. Implicitly or explicitly, the student is meant to be able to perform some such activities as:

- infer from the passage (i.e. read between the lines).
- infer from the passage the context in which it was written.
- recognise the writer's purpose and attitude.
- follow the different stages of an argument, i.e. "rank" statements within the passage.
- appreciate the rhetorical, technical and stylistic effects (i.e. the text's literariness) their use, effect and purpose.
- assess input of stylistic specific terminology and figurative speech etc...
- draw conclusions.

Ultimately and ideally this approach should culminate in some such gratifying productive tasks as:

- rewriting the passage, or a dialogue, from a different point of view.
- commenting on the type of metaphors or analogies used, and what effect they are meant to produce on the reader.
- using all clues contained in the passage (stylistic, technical etc.) writing an essay on the skill and craft of the author.
- selecting information from a passage to support a particular point of view.
- extracting from a passage the most important information for a particular purpose.

The objective in all this is to foster the development of both critical and creative reflexes leading eventually to an enlightened, clear-sighted literary education of the reader.

The Information Based Approach focuses on the writer, his life and the general context within which he lived and worked. It has the clear advantage of **relating text to context**. Even in the eyes of language based approach proponents it is a conventional but very valuable and necessary approach to literary study. It privileges the study of literature in relation to the social, economic and ideological context within which it was produced.

This approach, in particular, may be complemented whenever pedagogically appropriate and culturally pertinent with substantial and/or significant comparative references to local cultural context emphasizing interrelationships and possible interactions with national cultural and literary heritage through hints to similar or related texts, themes, writers, poets, thinkers, literary genres etc. In the interpenetrated and interpenetrative world we live in, this comparative “bonus” can only increase the student’s self-awareness, help him gain insight into himself as well as others, promote his own personal culture and fortifies his character and personality in a world of change and challenge.

In the final analysis, and this has been the gist of my argument, the issues of syllabus design and text choice become much less problematic when/if pertinent, effective approaches to teaching literature have been devised. The objective being to induce a thoughtful, critical, interactive attitude to text, to its structure and contents, to its technical and rhetorical elements, as well as, naturally, to the explicit or implicit philosophical and ideological assumptions embedded into it.

The final goal being to use literature study for improving the student’s global cultural understanding through an exchange of ideas across cultural barriers. Foreign literature is the reflection of past and present cultures, civilisations, philosophies and ways of life transmitted to us through the deforming prism of literature, through the refracted and refracting image of fiction. Students are alerted to the possibilities of reading into what is being said, but also indeed into what is not explicit in a text, to what is between and behind the lines. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* provides in this respect an illuminating example of a multi-levelled reading of a text.

What we are to bear in mind is that literature is neither a leisurely activity to refine the minds of an aristocratic intellectual elite, nor should it be allowed to develop into a stiff and doctrinaire activity, unlikely to promote either aesthetic appreciation or intellectual insight. Literature is a means to see others and meet others. It is also a privileged means of critical self-examination, a way to set ourselves at some distance and observe ourselves with sharper critical perspective. And if literature fails to do that, it will have failed in its essence and objectives. And therefore, developing strategies to literary text study becomes a means to face **confidently** any text, no matter how provocative or alien to our culture, or even threatening, it might appear. Developing **attitude** in the learner is a means to promote good cultural tolerance, if not integration, or at worst, a way to ward off any “threat”, or risk likely to come from the “dominant” culture, if risk there be!

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