

## Teaching Literature in a Foreign Language: New or Old Methods?

Dr. Mohammed Yamin BOULENOUAR  
Enseignant/chercheur  
Université Djilali Liabès de Sidi-Bel-Abbès  
Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines  
Dép. des Langues Étrangères  
E-mail: [bmydz@yahoo.fr](mailto:bmydz@yahoo.fr)

*In this paper, we will briefly give a picture of two types of activity which modern language methodologists are likely to view as traditional, in addition to drawing a crucial distinction with brand pioneering approaches. It is essential to bear in mind right from the start that most 'new' methods contain various characteristics of 'old' methods, those which are still frequently found these days in official programmes. I will end with a look at some essentials meant for getting better teachers/students' literary repertoire, with a number of suggestions about how reading and the use of creative writing can show native and overseas students alike to respond to such texts..*

### Introduction

EFL learners often complain that the '*language of literature is difficult*' or '*it's not normal English.*'<sup>1</sup> In a good number of prose texts; for example, the meaning of some strange word might prove frustrating and leads to learners' lack of interest. Being frequently exposed to models via reading and listening, the foreign learner can only refute this uncommon language, i. e. strange input. This is why several teachers have taken advantage of this as an argument for not teaching literature. Nowadays there is an evolving feeling concerning this particular language and that literature, in spite of its unfamiliar language; should take advantage of these barriers carefully.

Here are some suggestions that can help teachers keep away from these misleading influences:

- i. *Learners should be encouraged to look for global meanings so as to develop strategies such as skimming, scanning and guessing.*
- ii. *'Paraphrasable meaning' of a text, should be given sufficient time.*
- iii. *Be prepared to discuss how something could be said in modern or 'standard' English so as to avoid any feelings that 'we are learning incorrect English'.<sup>2</sup>*

### Ways of dealing with literature

In this section, we will describe briefly two types of activity which modern language methodologists are likely to see as behind the times, in addition to drawing a crucial distinction with brand new approaches. One can remark right from the start that most 'new' methods consist of various features of 'old' methods, those which are up till now repeatedly

---

<sup>1</sup> Parkinson, B., & Thomas, H. R.; (2004); *Teaching Literature in a second Language*; Edinburgh: EUP. p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> (Ibib.)

found today in official programmes. Allwright<sup>3</sup>, has, in fact, shown in *'The Death of the Method'* that classroom settings cannot be explained by a restricted number of methods, but chiefly by the interaction of several variables, some of which can be overtly observed and many of which go beyond linguistics as well as literary theory.

*Rote learning* and *summary of content* refer to learning the basic plot of novels or plays for example, or facts about the writer's life, relevant history and politics. This happens frequently in universities wherein the teacher gives facts to be memorised by learners. It is important to remark that there is no clear cut difference between rote learning and summary of content simply because in both cases students have to demonstrate an important amount of factual knowledge under examination conditions.

The uses of translated texts as an object of study are extensive topics. The purpose of translation either written or spoken should be lessened step by step. However, every bit of such translation is incomplete and selective. Besides, there are contradictory viewpoints regarding the status of translation in language learning; namely, that translation

*is not the [suitable] means to learn language, but is an 'add-on skill' which those already proficient in a foreign language can develop for very specific purposes. [Indeed,] good readers do not translate an L2 text, even in their heads, but understand it directly [and proceed analogously in the other skills].*<sup>4</sup>

The content of secondary literature, study of first-language literature at university level has traditionally integrated word for word, summarised or if not reworked, in essay form: taking lecture notes, memorising them prior to exams or using them in essays. In reality, the majority of university teachers would most probable maintain that study and use of secondary literature is not an end in itself, but should help in an open activity, which is writing about primary texts. Such writing – usually in the form of a short/long paragraph or an essay – should include the student's personal careful analysis of the main text; yet, the secondary literature is expected to encourage as well as develop this analysis. There is, then again, a divergence which appears to split teachers about

*whether use of secondary literature is essential for a good essay, or merely desirable, or an optional extra, or even a [support] for weaker students, and the same teacher may answer this question differently for dissimilar essays and students levels.*<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Allwright, D.; (1991); 'The Death of the Method'; *Revue de phonétique Appliquée*; 99/101; 79-87.

<sup>4</sup> (Ibid: 28-29)

<sup>5</sup> (Ibid: 30)

## Expanding teachers/students' literary repertoire

In what follows we will think about a variety of ideas which are more in order with the common environment of ideas in 'communicative' foreign language teaching. Both facts and skilled teachers' positions assert that, in countless situations, learners who read at length get better quickly than those who do not. There is, without a doubt, a small number of teachers who change students' minds to read for pleasure by means of shortened readers or 'graded readers' which provide them with tests of reading levels and teaching guides for class readers. Vincent and Carter<sup>6</sup> gave a relatively critical opinion of the use of these abridged readers as they propose to use realistic texts for 'simple material', and, as a result, maintaining literary texts complicated and 'authentic'. Generally speaking the widespread view recommends that *"The [solution] is not simplification, not literary quality, but the reader's personal [interest]"*<sup>7</sup>

Suggested ideas	Explanations
<b>1. Reading for content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Learners read a literary text to:</li> <li>✓ expand their cultural views</li> <li>▪ avoid being confined into the worldview and values of their particular place and time</li> </ul>
<b>2. Reading solely as foreign language practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Learners study a literary text, or an extract to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ find new vocabulary,</li> <li>▪ answer with questions about it,</li> <li>▪ do exercises on vocabulary and grammar about it.</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ there are dangers with the use of such activities because both short texts and extracts can:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ falsify' literature,</li> <li>▪ slow down extensive reading</li> <li>▪ hamper learner autonomy.</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ It is preferable to espouse this teaching approach only as part of practical strategy.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Linguistic analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Learners study very cautiously the language of literary text in which features for instance aspects of discourse organisation/narrative structure which usually operate inside long sections of text.</li> <li>✓ As a follow up, criticism on (or guesses regarding) the aim, effect as well as meaning of such aspects will be dealt with.<sup>8</sup></li> </ul>
<b>4. Personal response</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Refers to a certain number of categories of classroom proceedings:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ reading totally/or partially</li> <li>▪ setting</li> <li>▪ debating</li> <li>▪ shifting to something different</li> <li>▪ keeping on additional work</li> <li>▪ writing</li> <li>▪ transferring in classrooms</li> <li>▪ cancelling</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ learners are asked about:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ what books/types of books (novels, novellas, short stories, plays and poems), they hope to be trained at?</li> <li>▪ how much they enjoy it?</li> <li>▪ what they hope to perform at the moment?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Ideas meant for improving both teaching/learning literature

<sup>6</sup> Vincent, M. & Carter, R.; (1986); 'Simple text and reading text'; In. Brumfit, C. J. & Carter, R. A. (eds.); *Literature and Language Teaching*; Oxford: UP. 208-222.

<sup>7</sup> Parkinson, B., & Thomas, H. R.; *Teaching Literature in a second Language*; p. 29

<sup>8</sup> (Ibid.).

In relation to the *raison d'être* of *reading for content* which can not only help students to widen cultural horizons but also reduce the locking up of learners into the worldview and values of their own place and time, the following series of questions taken from classroom settings may almost certainly make easier. Here are some examples that can help to understand better what is behind the genuine interpretation of reading for content:

- What picture of Africa do you get from the novella of “*Heart of Darkness*”?
- What was life in Joyce’s Dublin?
- What would it be like to be one of Fitzgerald’s characters?
- Why has Hawthorne written about pilgrims’ way of life?
- What picture of America do you get from Fitzgerald’s “*The Great Gatsby*”?

Through these questions, the lecturer may be looking for answers on a variety of levels: a simple remembering of facts, a number of levels of interpretation, comparisons with other texts and with students’ personal views. This kind of teaching procedure can engender the belief that “*cross-cultural awareness raising also belongs in other parts of the curriculum (history, social studies, and geography), and that works of literature can be used there.*”<sup>9</sup>

*Reading solely as foreign language practice* refers to lectures wherein learners study a literary text, or more exactly an extract, finding new vocabulary, answer with questions about it, and possibly will do exercises on vocabulary and grammar about it. Once more there are dangers with the use of such activities because both short texts and extracts can not only ‘falsify’ literature, slow down extensive reading but also hamper learner autonomy. In all, it is preferable to espouse this teaching approach only as part of practical strategy.

Another major aspect of teaching activity which is widely used in many literature courses of literature for overseas students concerns *Linguistic analysis*. In this kind of analysis learners study very carefully the language of literary text wherein features such as aspects of discourse organisation or narrative structure which in general function within long stretches of text. As a follow up, criticism on (or guesses regarding) the aim, effect as well as meaning of such aspects will be dealt with.<sup>10</sup>

*Personal response* (see figure below) refers to the great number of categories of classroom proceedings, let’s concentrate on two simply. In relation to the first (reading totally or partially), learners are asked about

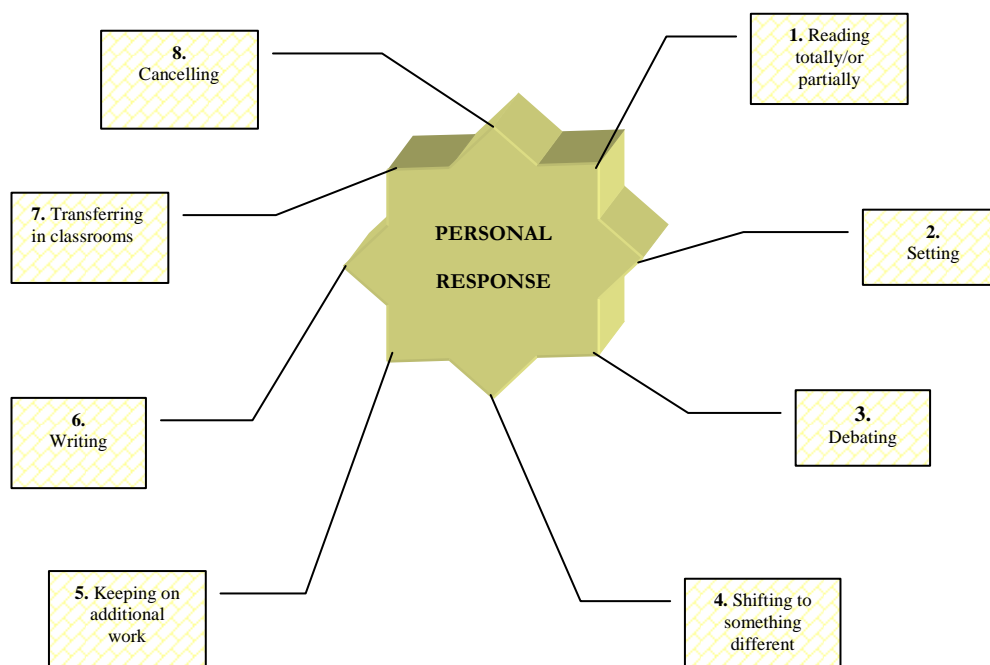
- What books or types of books (novels, novellas, short stories, plays and poems), they hope to be trained at. As soon as they have begun reading it, they are asked
- How much they enjoy it, as well as
- What they hope to perform at the moment.

---

<sup>9</sup> (Ibid: 32).

<sup>10</sup> (Ibid.).

In other words, they will decide between ending or else cancelling it, reading it entirely or partially, transferring it in classroom settings or setting it on their own as assignments, put it in writing or coming up by means of a debate about it in different approaches; keep on additional work of the similar nature before shifting to something entirely different.



**Figure 1:** Categories of classroom proceedings.<sup>11</sup>

In lots of modules, students wait for the teacher to notify to them what to read, and will speak barely regarding what they in fact take pleasure in. Behaviours like these along with thoughts can be altered just gradually. To keep away from unpleasant or else uncomfortable teaching state of affairs in which inhibition as well as anxiety<sup>12</sup> will dominate, it is advisable to show students either with the help of

- *a brief list of books to select from, by means of summaries and comments or*
- *an experimental lecture (or half-lecture) in which a fragment is examined prior to a class*
- *a few video clips from a movie of the book or else a slide show concerning the place and time.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> (Ibid.).

<sup>12</sup> According to Scovel, the anxiety concept can be divided within two parts: facilitating anxiety through which the learner can be motivated to “fight” the new learning task in that it helps him emotionally for approach behaviour and debilitating anxiety which motivates the learner to flee the new learning task. In. Scovel, T.; (1978); The effect of affect on foreign language learning: a review of the anxiety research; *Language Learning* 28, 129-142.)

<sup>13</sup> Parkinson, B., & Thomas, H. R.; *Teaching Literature in a second Language*; pp. 29-31

It is essential to implement group work in order to offer the possibility to groups of students to perform detailed tasks. From time to time external limitations like examination programme of study may occur; therefore, it is preferable to let the class know of all the probable options. Students in this case are pushed either to acquire or else borrow them or given permission to know the teacher's personal aims so that they can not only suggest a number of texts but also made aware of others.

In this sort of personal response, students will be able first to expand the chances of studying the accurate book, i.e. one that students will take pleasure in, read fully along with comprehension; next, they are more apt to have additional affecting reliability to it. In the end, being conscious that views regarding a book are taken into consideration, both the action of reading as well as the act of talking concerning the book has to be made genuine and well-founded so that more probable enjoyable literature learning will occur.

Research has shown that the most common games-like games are vocabulary matching<sup>14</sup> crosswords and similar puzzles, charades,<sup>15</sup> or 'Just a Minute', which involve talking about a given topic for a few seconds without pause, repetition or break of thought. Ur's *Discussions that Work*<sup>16</sup> which could be applied to teaching literature is worth mentioning here:

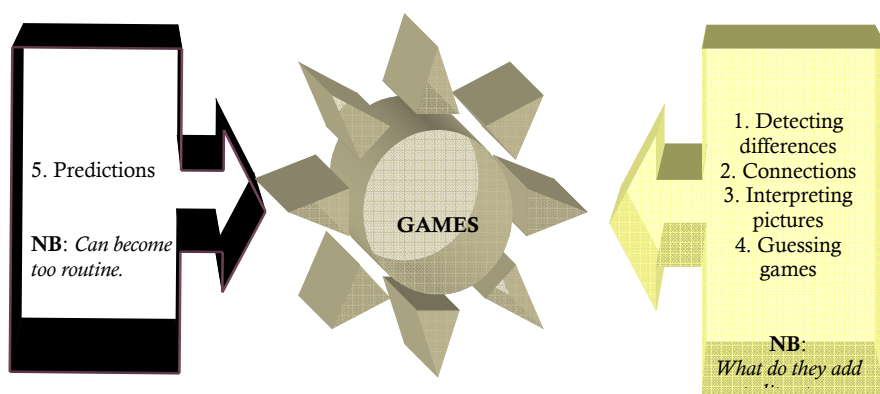
- **Connections:** one group thinks of a connection involving two characters, places, and so on, in distinct settings; the others guess.
- **Interpreting pictures:** this could be based on the front cover illustrations of a book or a drawing made by students. (Ur 1981)
- **Detecting differences:** someone narrates an incident in a new studied text, making slight but major changes. If possible, the speaker should speak for one of the characters, making efforts to establish an excuse for his/her behaviour/defence. The rest of the class interrogates the narrator and attempts to demonstrate wrongness or contradiction.
- **Guessing games:** two students act out a dialogue freely built on a scene in fresh book, but not taken word for word from it and leaving out names and other orderly details; the rest of the class guesses the supposed book and scene.

---

<sup>14</sup> Wherein words from a text are written on slips of paper, the definition on other slips of paper, and both are submitted to students, who have to discover a match.

<sup>15</sup> Where learners have to 'demonstrate' a literary work or character by gesture without speaking.

<sup>16</sup> Ur's *Discussions that Work* (1981)



**Figure 2:** Discussions that work<sup>17</sup>

All of these types can help to gain or regain the interest of impassive students, and can bring life as well as real learning during lectures. On the other hand, they have a predisposition to draw attention to factual knowledge of the text, with only restricted interpretation.

In ‘predictions’ and related ‘guessing games’ learners may be asked to guess what a story is going to be about, first on the basis of the title alone, then after a few paragraphs, then again at regular intervals throughout the text. The question may be general or very specific. The probable results can have an effect on the clear understanding of common literary principle, closer attention to details of plot, as well as an increase in both real language and personal interest.

A class of activities which is becoming more and more vital in the teaching of literature refers, for instance, to the ‘create one’s own text’. One can write a thoroughly altered imaginative text because there are practically countless possibilities for adaptation, reproduction, précis, translation to a new genre, i.e. novel to play for example, follow-up and so on.

In this present suggestion we are interested in reading but using creative writing as an essential means to their ends. For instance, Bob Pope’s *Textual Intervention*,<sup>18</sup> which assumes higher levels of linguistic and literary competence, seems equally suitable for native and non-native speakers because it includes both literary and non-literary texts. It starts from the principle that “*The best way to understand how a text works (...) is to change it: to play*

<sup>17</sup> Adapted from Ur, P.; (1981); *Discussions That Work*, Cambridge: CUP.

<sup>18</sup> Pope, B.; (1995); *Textual Intervention*,<sup>18</sup>

around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then try to account for the exact effect of what you have done.<sup>19</sup>

	<b>KINDS OF ACTIVITIES INVOLVING LITERATURE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM</b>	<b>EXPLANATIONS</b>
1.	<b>Reading for pleasure</b>	Learners who read in quantity improve more rapidly than those who do not. This improvement includes all areas of language
2	<b>Reading for content</b>	Can not only help students to widen cultural horizons but also reduce the locking up of learners into the worldview and values of their own place and time,
3	<b>Reading solely as foreign language practice</b>	Learners study a literary text, or often an extract, look up difficult words, answer questions about it, do excises on vocabulary and grammar relating to it.
4	<b>Linguistic analysis</b>	Considered as one of the major activity types which are appropriate in many literature courses for foreign language learners. It involves looking very closely at the language of literary texts, including features like deviance, regularity, polysemy, and mimesis, and also features of discourse organization or narrative structure which operates over long stretches of text.
5	<b>Personal response</b>	Refers to the great number of categories of classroom proceedings.
6	<b>Games and 'fun' activities</b>	Games depend largely on learners' culture, previous experience, and perhaps gender. They can help to gain or regain the interest of apathetic students, and can bring life and real learning to otherwise 'dead' sessions at the end of a day or week. They tend to stress factual knowledge of the text, with only limited interpretation. Besides, most can be used only after a text, or quite a lot of it, has already been read and understood.
7	<b>Prediction and related activities</b>	Prediction helps readers to activate their prior knowledge about a topic, beginning the process of combining what they know with new material in the text. Predictions are not simply wild guesses, they are based on clues within the text such as pictures, illustrations, subtitles, and plot. Students can be encouraged to make predictions 'before' and 'during' reading. During reading, effective readers adjust and refine their earlier predictions as new information is gathered and new connections are made. They tend to rehearse what they have learnt and move on with some expectations of what comes next (Graves & Graves, 2003; Slater & Hortsman, 2000).
8	<b>Creating one's own text</b>	One can write a thoroughly altered imaginative text because there are practically countless possibilities for adaptation, reproduction, précis, translation to a new genre, i.e. novel to play for example, follow-up and so on. For e.g. reading so as to use creative writing as an essential means.

**Table 2:** Types of activities used in teaching literature<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to put forward some suggestions related to teaching literature with overseas students. What happens in classrooms, has, in fact, shown that classroom settings cannot be explained by a restricted number of methods, but simply by the interaction

<sup>19</sup> (Ibid: 1)

<sup>20</sup> Adapted from Parkinson, B., & Thomas, H. R.; *Teaching Literature in a second Language*; pp. 30-39



of many variables, some of which can be openly observed and many of which go beyond linguistics as well as literary theory one.

### References

- ✓ Allwright, D.; (1991); 'The Death of the Method'; *Revue de Phonétique Appliquée*; 99/101; 78-87.
- ✓ Parkinson, B. & Thomas, H.R.; (2004); *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*; Edinburgh: EUP.
- ✓ Pope, B. (1995); *Textual Intervention*; New York: Penguin.
- ✓ Ur, P.; (1981); *Discussions That Work*; Cambridge: CUP.
- ✓ Vincent, M. & Carter, R.; (1986); 'Simple text and reading text'; In. Brumfit, C.J. & Carter, R. A. (eds.); *Literature and Language Teaching*; Oxford: OUP. 208-222.