

‘What do you read, my Lord?’ Some reflections on the role of literature in language teaching

If language learning is an ‘epiphenomenon of communicative interaction’ (Smith & Halibut 2003: iv), then the nature of that interaction must necessarily play a central role in determining learning outcomes. One key parameter, widely discussed since Otto Gabalunzie’s seminal paper (1984), is that of transparency. Broadly speaking, the more clearly specified and objectively interpretable the input to which learners are exposed, the more narrowly their possible responses are constrained. Conversely, the more the input lends itself to multiple interpretations, and the less learners are in a position to adjudicate between such interpretations, the broader their response-potential. In other words, input transparency is inversely proportional to communicative freedom, without which there is no scope for stretched output and consequent interlanguage restructuring (Gummiband & Carambo 1998). At one extreme, where the input consists primarily of the highly artificial and over-specified discourse samples found in the typical language coursebook, learner output ‘may effectively be reduced to nothing more than repetitive crypto-regurgitation’ (Frikadeller 2003: 19, 23, 26, 42, 89, 121, 342, 706). At the other end of the scale, well-chosen literary texts can provide precisely the level of input subjectivity which, by fostering maximally unconstrained output, offers optimal potential for interlanguage development.

Every poem is a dialogue to which the reader is invited to bring at least as much as the writer. When the poet says that the evening mist rising from the fields reminds him of lost love, the reader enriches the poem with a memory of city bus stops in April. When the poet describes his early deflowering in a Worcestershire cowshed, the reader, brought face to face with his unbearable failure to pay off his mortgage, goes and hangs himself. Truly, the artist bears a heavy responsibility. (Bunnahabhain 1993: 960)

Drama, with its multiple levels of discourse, is particularly rich in its provision of opportunities for individual interpretation, as Arapaho & Bejasus argue persuasively in their discussion of *Hamlet* (2001: 19).

The play’s centre – its ‘still turning point’ – is the moment when Polonius asks ‘What do you read, my Lord?’ and Hamlet replies ‘Words, words, words’. Here we have the clearest possible statement of the hyperdimensionality of drama: of the instantiation of its *logos* at one and the same time in a representation of an action, the mimetic process which embodies that representation, the text which encodes that process, and the intersecting reflections and refractions of all three. There are indeed at this point no less than five superimposed discourses: Polonius’ internalisation of his own utterance, Hamlet’s internalisation of Polonius’ utterance, Hamlet’s internalisation of his reply, Polonius’s internalisation of Hamlet’s reply, and our, the eavesdroppers’, distinct and separately valid internalisations of the verbal interaction. Now, with Polonius’ multiply ambiguous response: ‘What is the matter, my Lord?’, ...

In responding to literary texts, the language learner in fact enjoys a unique advantage (Vachercher 2000). Unconstrained by built-in linguistic preconceptions, a non-native

reader is open to interpretations which pass the native speaker by, and which can enhance the intrinsic opacity of a text in rich and unpredictable ways. Some striking examples are reported by Pinbottom (2003) in his account of an action research project carried out with a class of Samoedic bus conductors, during which his 15 intermediate learners worked through a range of English classics. One of Pinbottom's subjects, for instance, perceived the 'two vast and trunkless legs' of Shelley's Ozymandias as belonging to an obese traveller named Stone who had lost his luggage. (How much more productive this response is, as a platform for task-based discussion or creative writing, than the standard 'Booking a hotel room' or 'At the lost property office' scenario.) Another student, confusing Ophelia with Othello, produced a novel and gripping interpretation of Hamlet which was further enhanced by her belief that her tutor's mention of the hero's 'tragic flaw' referred to the flagstones in the Elsinore chapel.

The linguistic creativity often manifested in literary texts also serves to liberate learners from the notion that there are fixed 'norms' on which their own production must converge. As corpus research is making increasingly clear (Petersilie *et al* 2005), the dividing line between formulaic and constructed language is neither clearly defined nor static, and strategic phraseological competence can be greatly enhanced by appropriate consciousness-raising activities. Shadrach and his colleagues (2007) report interesting results from a study in this area, in which they took Shakespeare's creative imagery as a platform for metaphor-generation by advanced non-native-speaking accountancy students. Some of their subjects' more valuable contributions to the English phraseological lexicon included the expressions *to nail one's trousers to the mast, as happy as a yoghurt pot, to jump off the rainbow, wind-surfing in the bath and she farts like a trooper*.

Although there is general agreement on the value of having a significant opacity quotient in input material, opinions on the question of total incomprehensibility are somewhat divided. While texts which cannot be understood at all offer maximum scope for individualised personal response, the exclusive study of such material is seen by some scholars as having certain disadvantages, well summarised by Zippo (2000). One is the fact that learners' processing of the input may move them towards the development of idiosyncratic and impenetrable 'litlects' (Pif 1998; see also Swan & Walter 1982 for a similar problem arising in other circumstances). On the other hand, as Angst & LaTrouille point out (2004), the 'referential white-out' characteristic of incomprehensible texts renders them ideal as vehicles for exploring aspects of morphosyntax. Dylan Thomas's work, for instance, can usefully be mined for instances of adverb formation:

Altarwise by owl light in the halfway house
the gentleman lay graveward with his furies

or *-ing* forms:

On field and sand
The twelve triangles of the cherub wind
Engraving going.

Article use, too, can be profitably studied in maximally opaque texts. Consider for example the following well-known lines from Eliot's *Burnt Norton*:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
clot the bedded axle tree.
The trilling wire in the blood

sings below inveterate scars
appeasing long-forgotten wars.

Here the poet uses the definite article – the grammatical signal that interlocutors are on common referential ground – as a way of counterfeiting shared experience, subliminally fooling the reader into believing that he or she knows just what mud and axle-tree, which trilling wire and whose blood are under discussion. Language learners, of course, are chronically in the position of having to pretend that they are on common ground with their speech partners, when in fact they may have no idea at all of what is being talked about. To discover that one of the most eminent of twentieth century poets operates on precisely the same lines as they do (and furthermore, to identify at last a practical use for the definite article) is enormously empowering.

Conventional approaches to teaching can easily give learners a negative view of the gap between their own private, intramental language worlds, and the social, intermental interpretations and uses sanctioned by native speakers. All too often they are told that they have ‘misunderstood’ what they hear or read, or are made to feel inferior because their own utterances are interpreted in varied and contradictory ways by their interlocutors. Literature-based language work can help learners to see the communicative nexus in a different and altogether more positive light. Through study of this kind they come to realise that they are in principle in exactly the same position as other language users, from the supermarket shelf stacker to the greatest names in the history of literature. They belong by right, that is to say, to a vast linguistic and cultural community, no two members of which understand, or are understood, in the same way, to the extent indeed that they understand anything at all. Literature, as one of Shadrach *et al*'s subjects might have put it, is a level golf course.

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