The Mere Understanding:
Representation Reading in Practice

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'How shall this be conveyed and made palpable?'

Secondary school teachers of English in Malaysia find themselves on the horns of a dilemma at the moment. Something of an identity crisis seems to be taking hold. And the crux of the problem seems to me to lie between ESL and EFL: is English actually a second language or is it a foreign language?

The answer is that for the majority of students - and they are the people that matter English is not the same English as it was for the generation teachers who are now thirty-something (or a little more). The Ministry of Education's move towards reinstating English as both a linguistic and cultural force has brought out some of the issues which need to be highlighted, discussed, and evaluated in the sphere of language teaching for the 1990s.

Language teaching is not a static subject. Just as language itself is in a constant state of flux, the discipline of language teaching is constantly moving forward, evolving, revaluing itself and its terminology, the tricks of the trade and the methodologies it employs. I recently wrote, with a conscious intention to disturb superficially calm waters: 'In future years, the absence of imaginative content in language teaching will be considered to have marked a primitive stage of the discipline.' (McRae, 1991: vii).

The very positive and forward-looking policy of integrating literature into language learning underscores the fact that Malaysia is at a turning point in language education. The implications of these are considerable, especially at university teacher-training level, where a concentration on ESL has led to many qualified teachers feeling inadequately equipped to cope with the immense difficulties of an EFL teaching situation: a situation which one teacher graphically described to me in Kelantan as "in Form 5 some of them still cannot put the subject, the verb, and the object in the correct order in a sentence."

While that may be the negative extreme, let no teacher gloat in a superior way. The problem is shared by all learners, and depends on what I have called the fifth skill -thinking. This is a 'skill' which comes before, during, and after the purely referential application of the traditional four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). In a true ESL situation, thinking in English is stimulated by constant exposure to the language; in an EFL situation, less exposure or infrequent exposure to the

target language quantifiably reduces the learner's capacity to assimilate, react to, and be aware of the language.

In some parts of Malaysia, notably the Federal capital, learners have considerable exposure to English. In others, Kelantan for instance, they have practically no such opportunities to see, hear, read, or listen to English. The problem is multiplied in rural areas, and teachers in such challenging situations live and work in a yawning gap between theory and practice, ideal world and real world, which many ESL techniques do not help them to bridge.

'This was to be expressed.'

Working with highly motivated Malaysian teachers, I found this problem manifested itself most clearly to questions of class management and time management, and the use of role-play and simulation in pre-reading activities. When a class period is forty minutes long, how much actual constructive learning can be achieved? Twenty minutes' worth might be cynical answer or might be a realistic one.

Whatever the case, it seems strange to advocate that ten minutes or more of a single lesson should be devoted to pre-reading activities. The kind of parallel identification simulation which is supposed to help students into aspects of a text involves a mental leap, a creative transfer process which is remarkably difficult for a student who has a fairly low level of competence in the target language. There has, in recent years, been something of a fad for role-play and simulations, and in no way would I wish to belittle the contribution they can make to language learning. But the word 'learning' is the key. What is the learning achieved? And how is the pre-reading activity balanced in terms of learning aim/reasons for reading? To my mind, reading and language awareness through reading, through close work on the language text - must mean that the text is given pride of place in the classroom. The role of the teacher is thereby modified. From being an animator, trying to stimulate identification with imagined situations outside the text's terms of reference, he or she becomes an enabler showing rather than telling, helping learners to see what the language is doing, how it is working, how meanings are being created, achieved, and manipulated. "All meaning lies in the key of interpretation," wrote George Eliot. This must be the focus for interactive reading, for the use of representational materials at all levels, from near-beginners to advanced. The alternative, either through constraints of time, or through the teacher's 'standing in front of the text' to give input, is what Anthony Jennings (1989) has very aptly described as "the hollow formality of scanning the words on the page."

'The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted.'

Oscar Wilde, that purveyor of paradoxical wisdom and upsetter of hypocritical apple-carts, wrote "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." To some extent, 'design' in art reflects the desire in the spectator, the reader, the receiver of the textual message, to find 'design' in life, order in chaos, stability in an ever-changing universe. Language is the ordered representation of disorder tamed; without it, in Othello's words, "chaos is come again."

Language tells - but what?
Language describes - but how? and how well?
Language informs - but who? and how much?
Language deceives.
Language entertains.

Language placates.
Language arouses emotion.
Language reveals.
Language conceals.
Language distorts.
Language ...

(McRae, 1991: 69)

'However obstinately I endeavoured with my understanding to comprehend this, for
many years I never could see why it should produce such an effect.'

Literature teaching should not be, as I suggest it rather often is, the random exposure of students to
literary texts which we as teachers, in what Christopher Brumfit has called our 'missionary' role, feel
will do them good in some ill-defined way. We can almost always find a justification for our choices
in terms of cultural, historical, social, stylistic, cross-referential, or 'literary' value, without feeling
any great need to do more than present, explicate, fill in background, and wait for the students to
come to the examinations.

What Deirdre Burton (1982: 195) has called "competitive sensitivity" comes to be what is thereupon
evaluated. Fully objective criteria for literature examinations are, and will remain, chimerical, but in
helping students learn to read literature I hope to show that a movement from subjectivity to
objectivity is a feasible and, indeed, essential element if the student is to learn what the study of
literature can do for him or her.

'I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it.'

Language teaching has introduced us to the phase of production, i.e. a moment when skills taught
have passed from teacher to student and the student can begin to use the linguistic competence he or
she has acquired. Literature teaching has yet to find a methodological base in an L2 situation which
permits the students such expression.

It is my contention that the first selection of literary texts presented to a class can encourage
response, while equipping the students with the initial perceptive abilities that will make them better
readers of literature, more aware of the author's intentions and of his or her success or otherwise in
achieving them, while at the same time discovering the pleasure and continuing reward to be derived
from the study and reading, the decoding and interpreting of literary texts.

'It is unreasonable to expect all men to be great artists.'

The choice of texts is of paramount importance. The following texts have been tried out at various
levels, and were used with an 'average' Form 3 at Sekolah Menengah Sen Puteri in Kuala Lumpur.
Clearly a full reading course goes on to use many more texts - from poetry to prose to drama. The
choice has to be dictated by stylistic and thematic concerns, in order to show students first how to
read before going on to discuss what they have read.

'I... exhort the reader never to pay any attention to his misunderstanding when it stands
in opposition to any other faculty of his mind.'

The methodology of presentation makes use of techniques I have discussed elsewhere; in particular,
the 'point of entry' and fuller examination of pre-reading stimuli (See Ellis and McRae, 1991: 15 and

McRae, 1991: 99). For the first passage, I only ask one pre-reading question: Which character do you sympathise with more?

PASSAGE ONE

So poor Virginia was worn out. She was thin as a rail. Her nerves were frayed to bits. And she could never forget her beastly work. She would come home at tea-time speechless and done for. Her mother, tortured. by the sight of her, longed to say: 'Has anything gone wrong, Virginia? Have you had anything particularly trying at the office today?' But she learned to hold her tongue, and say nothing. The question would be the last straw to Virginia's poor overwrought nerves, and there would be a little scene which, despite Mrs. Bodoin's calm and forebearance, offended the elder woman to the quick. She had learnt, by bitter experience, to leave her child alone, as one would leave a frail tube of vitriol alone. But, of course, she could not keep her mind off Virginia. That was impossible. And poor Virginia, under the strain of work and the strain of her mother's awful ceaseless mind, was at the very end of her strength and resources.
Mrs Bodoin had always disliked the fact of Virginia's doing a job. But now she hated it. She hated the whole government office with violent and virulent hate. Not only was it undignified for Virginia to be tied up there, but it was turning her, Mrs. Bodoin's daughter, into a thin, nagging, fearsome old maid. Could anything be more utterly English and humiliating to a well-born Irishwoman?

(D.H. Lawrence, Mother and Daughter)

'Of course I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them.'

After reading and re-reading the passage, the students almost always declare their sympathy for Virginia; some sympathy for the mother helps to underline the individuality of interpretation, reinforcing student awareness that there are not necessarily 'right' or 'wrong' answers in a representational context. Following through the adjectives used, it can be seen that they, more than anything else, are used to create and direct sympathy. So, next, students are asked to find one adjective each chosen by (a) the narrator/author, (b) Mrs Bodoin, (c) Virginia.

"Poor" in line one answers (a) quickly enough - students can then follow "poor" through shifting direction of sympathy to a very clear sympathy with Virginia. All the adjectives surrounding Mrs Bodoin in the second paragraph, especially those describing Virginia ("thin, nagging, fearsome"), are chosen by Mrs Bodoin, It is more difficult to decide on an adjective chosen by Virginia, but "awful ceaseless" usually emerges as a clear example.

Obviously this is not to say that every adjective (or, in other passages, qualifiers and modifiers of various kinds) must be traced back to who chose it. Rather I want simply to raise awareness of how sympathy can be created, in order that the reader begins to wonder why his or her sympathy is being manipulated at all. What is the desired intention of the author in his or her balancing or directing of sympathy? An answer to this leads to a first evaluation of the thematic concerns of the passages: with 'Mother and Daughter', students, unaware of the title of the story from which the passage is taken (giving the title can influence basic reactions too much), decided that its 'subject' was: the generation gap; female independence; women without men; mother/daughter tensions. A recognition is clear of the fact of tension or conflict within the passage - something students will go on to look for in further texts to be read.

Prediction of what might happen can be fun, but unless carefully directed can be a waste of time. What I find more productive with the present text is to work back from that first "So". The end of the passage is an impasse, with a kind of turning point at "But", and the emphasis on the repetition of "hate", so almost anything could happen. It is fascinating to have students develop ideas on what has led to the situation - past to present. Future prediction might come after some other texts have been examined.

'He allows his understanding to overrule his eyes.'

The second text is presented with one pre-reading question: How many characters are there, and what is their precise relationship to one another?

PASSAGE TWO

One day, when he sat talking with his 'uncle', he looked straight into the eyes of the sick man, and said: 'But I shouldn't like to live and die here in Rawsley.'

> 'No - well - you needn't,' said the sick man.
> 'Do you think Cousin Matilda likes it?'
> 'I should think so.'
> 'I don't call it much of a life,' said the youth.
> 'How much older is she than me, Uncle?'
> The sick man looked at the young soldier.
> 'A good bit,' he said.
> 'Over thirty?' said Hadrian.
> 'Well, not so much. She's thirty-two.' Hadrian considered a while.
> 'She doesn't look it,' he said.
> Again the sick father looked at him.
> 'Do you think she'd like to leave here?' said Hadrian.
> 'Nay, I don't know,' replied the father, restive.
> Hadrian sat still, having his own thoughts. Then in a small, quiet voice, as if
> he were speaking from inside himself, he said:
> 'I'd marry her if you wanted me to.'
> The sick man raised his eyes suddenly and stared. He stared for a long time.
> The youth looked inscrutably out of the window.
> 'You!' said the sick man, mocking, with some contempt. Hadrian turned and
> met his eyes. The two men had an inexplicable understanding.
> 'If you weren't against it,' said Hadrian.
> 'Nay,' said the father, turning aside, 'I don't think I'm against it. I've never
> thought of it. But - but Emmie's the youngest.'
> He had flushed and looked suddenly more alive. Secretly he loved the boy.
> 'You might ask her,' said Hadrian.
> The elder man considered.
> 'Hadn't you better ask her yourself?' he said.
> 'She'd take more notice of you,' said Hadrian.
> They were both silent. Then Emmie came in.

(D.H. Lawrence, *You Touched Me*)

The pre-question inevitably leads to dissension. Not only does "uncle" cause problems (he is Hadrian's stepfather, and the girls' father, but the recognition of the importance of the graphological deviation implied in the inverted commas is more important than any absolutely 'correct' answer), but responses vary from two characters to as many as five! Delineation of active and passive participants in the action leads to a careful following through of how cohesive elements present Hadrian. From "he" we move to growing recognition through the youth, the young man and the soldier - his name is almost irrelevant to the growing body of knowledge the reader builds up about him. Similarly, contrasts between the old man and Hadrian can be followed through the first half of the passage. It is difficult to pin down any direction of sympathy, but levels of tension between and among the characters can quickly be picked out. The narrator builds up a simply constructed scene where silence is the great hidden presence; the layout of the passage may make it less dense than the previous text studied, but careful readings bring out the tensions between the lines. A look at the adjectives describing the old man after "I'd marry her if you wanted me to" indicate a change, a revival of interest, a new complicity between the two men instead of the tension between them; the balance of tension moves to a Hadrian/old man versus Emmie/Matilda polarisation. Relating the techniques used in the first passage, students can actually pinpoint "I'd marry her if you wanted me to" as the turning point of the passage, and go on to find confirmation in the physical aspects mentioned (eyes, looking out of the window), sentence length, even the tones of voice required of the speakers. The last words, not being a separate paragraph, leave the new tension at a very useful point for prediction of what will happen as the story goes on.

> 'A fresh proof that I had been right in relying on my own feeling in opposition to my understanding.'

What students have been looking for is threefold:

- useful cohesionidiscourse markers;
- direction of sympathy;
- direct effect.

They have picked out for each (but not necessarily in order):

- pronouns, connectors;
- adjectives, modifiers;
- tension, turning point.

All these have been used to confirm or refute a first instinctive response, becoming an objective clarification of a subjective initial reaction to what was read. The guiding on the part of the teacher must be careful, but not too technical.

> 'Into this hell we are to look.'

It might be observed that I have not gone into Free Direct Speech, Free Indirect Speech, Narrative Report of Speech or Thought Acts, and so on; it is not yet necessary to give names or labels to what is a first step towards aware reading. After another few such carefully chosen passages, each with very clear teaching aims and a high degree of stylistic and thematic accessibility, students will be ready to describe what they are

doing, and thus what the author is doing. On1y then might the vexed question of evaluation be raised, as the last step on Short's ladder (1983: 70):

Evaluation   Interpretation   Description

By now the possibilities of contrastive cross-referential evaluation will be greater; all the passages used will be continually referred back to throughout the course, reinforcing and, indeed, amplifying the points they were originally chosen to teach.

'It is to this that I now solicit the reader's attention.'

It will have been noted that there is a distinct lack of comprehension questions, and that my texts have been taken from the middle of short stories. Both perhaps require some brief justification.

Reading comprehension as such is useful in checking understanding, and in clarifying possible difficulties in syntax or lexis. The passages used present very little such difficulty and it should by now be clear that simple understanding, although basic, is the least of our aims. The direction of questioning should always work through comprehension towards some response which goes beyond the simple level understanding and calls upon some reflective, interpretative or evaluative capacity, whose development is then to be encouraged.

As all teachers do, I chose texts which appeal to me. Part of their appeal lies in the possibilities of exploration of 'before' and 'after'; it has been noted how the cohesive elements in the two texts briefly examined are useful for teaching purposes. The only difficulty from the teacher's point of view lies in choosing passages which (a) do not demonstrate too many entailments shorn of their presuppositions (or vice versa), (b) are sufficiently self-contained to be exploitable - neither too long or too short, (c) have various possible approaches in terms of stylistics and theme. The more open the passage, the richer the response can be.

Clearly, at this early stage, our discussion does not involve the plot of the story as a whole, although, of course, the move from micro-text to macro-text may come after a series of not too closely related passages has been tackled, and students are ready to see the passage in relation to the author's whole concept. This does not, I feel, preclude the use of passages from novels, even though students may not go on to read the whole novel.

'All actions in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction.'

Thus, little by little, students acquire tools with which to approach their reading of literary texts. They do not go too deeply into the figure in the carpet, but neither should the apparatus show them too clearly the writing on the wall. The process is one of enabling, of guidance towards discovery. The essence of this discovery is that it allows for students' own reactions, interpretations, recall of experience; it opens up the possibility of their interaction with the text.

As Bialystok (1982) says, "In unanalysed representations of language, only the meanings are coded; in analysed representations, both the meanings and relationships between the forms and those meanings are coded. Such analysed representations permit the learner to manipulate those form-meaning relationships to create particular structured uses of language. While conversations may proceed perfectly well from unanalysed representations... other uses of language involved in reading, writing, lecturing, explaining depend on greater analysis in linguistic structure."

To conclude with De Quincey's words from *On the Knocking at the Gate in MacBeth*', quotations which may or may not have been identifiable to the aware reader of this paper, "the further we press in our discoveries, the more we shall see proofs of design and self-supporting arrangement where the careless eye had seen nothing but accident!"

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