

READING LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the nature of literary texts and the need for students to be taught to read them in a manner which goes beyond literal comprehension of the texts. The writer advocates reading literary texts which allows for both cognitive processing of information and aesthetic appreciation. The writer provides a framework for reading literary texts using Barrett's taxonomy. A range of questioning strategies is discussed in relation to reading various literary texts taught in the Malaysian secondary school English language programme.

Introduction

The reading of literary texts is often a challenge in many second language classrooms. Students need to understand the texts before they can experience or enjoy them. However, too often, it is another reading comprehension lesson in a language classroom (Vethamani, 2004). Students are usually given a list of questions that test students' literal comprehension of the text. In this article, I will discuss the nature of literary texts and how appropriate questioning strategies can be employed to go beyond mere literal comprehension of literary texts.

Nature of Texts

All of us are consciously or unconsciously readers. Daily, we read a range of texts and respond to them in a variety of ways. These texts can be anything from road signs, telephone directories, do-it-yourself instructions, newspaper articles, comics, textbooks, short stories or novels. The nature of these texts is not similar because of the purpose for which they have been written. Thus, the language employed by the writers would all be dissimilar. This difference in the nature of language has been effectively described as referential language and representational language (McRae, 1991). This broad distinction will serve the purpose of this article as it helps to provide teachers with a better understanding on how to approach the reading of texts in the language or literature classroom.

Referential language communicates information and it comprises transactional and interactional language forms (greeting, apologising, taking leave, in-

forming, etc) that are taught to students in the communicative language classroom. Referential language would work only on one level — the literal level. Its purpose is primarily to inform. Examples of referential language would be road signs, information in telephone directories, and language that is limited to everyday real life. It is language that is explicit and unambiguous. It operates mainly at the cognitive level.

Representational language, on the other hand, engages the readers' imagination. It is implicit and often vague. Representational language would require the readers to use their imagination to arrive at the meaning of the text. It would require of the readers both an emotional and intellectual response to the text. The affective domain of the readers is stimulated and it provides the opportunity for personal response to and interpretation of the text. This will be illustrated in the activities provided in the later part of the article.

Reading for Different Purposes

Teachers also need to bear in mind that the purpose for reading maybe broadly categorised into efferent reading and aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). Students need to know why they are reading. They could be doing efferent reading, that is, reading for information or they could be doing aesthetic reading, which is, paying attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that the words evoke (Vethamani, 2002; Gunning, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1978). As literature teachers, we are concerned with aesthetic reading. We are not concerned with our learners merely discovering literal meaning of words in the text, but with the students' personal response to the text. It is the interaction between student and text that should be of concern to us.

Reading Literary Texts

Bearing in mind the above distinction regarding the nature of language in literary texts, literature teachers need to remind themselves that it is representational language that they will be dealing with. As such, the reading tasks and activities should be geared towards dealing with such language. It cannot be denied that students need to understand the literal meaning of the text. However, it is just not enough to work at information level. To stop at this stage would mean that the lesson remains very much a reading comprehension lesson, no different from any other reading comprehension lesson in any language classroom.

Lexis/Vocabulary

The tasks and activities in the literature classroom should require students to use their imagination, creativity, and interpretive ability. When dealing with lexis or vocabulary, teachers should encourage students to work out the meanings of words in the context that they are used. Dealing with denotative meaning or dictionary meaning should be kept to the minimal and more time should be spent on discussing the connotative meaning. Students should attempt to explore the writer's choice of words. Students need to examine the metaphorical meanings of the words. This will take them beyond literal meaning to literary interpretation of the text.

Students should not be made to feel satisfied just because they know the meaning of the words. They should study how the words work together effectively to convey the tone and meaning in the text. Exercises in substituting the writer's choice of words with synonyms would prove to be worthwhile to see if the effectiveness of the original word is retained, diminished or lost.

Teachers need to be continuously aware that literary texts comprise representational language. These texts should be viewed as open texts and therefore, there is room for multiplicity in meanings and interpretations. Teachers should not be dogmatic and expect students to provide 'correct' answers that the teachers have already formulated. Students should be allowed to explore the texts and respond to them through their own personal interpretations, which could be the result of their prior knowledge and experience.

Reading Literary Texts and Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Representational language in literary texts lends itself as an excellent means for developing the critical thinking skills of students. Reading tasks should require students to process the text by relating their linguistic ability (language proficiency and understanding of the elements of literature), knowledge of the world, and experience, to the text. Such activities will ensure that students do not just process meaning but go beyond literal meaning to using their critical and interpretive abilities.

The following diagram illustrates this. I will discuss the diagram further in the following sections.

Questioning Strategies

The questioning strategies of the literature teacher are also the key to unlocking the text to the students. Literature teachers should lead students from low-level

Reading Materials	Question Types	Barrett's Taxonomy	
Representational Materials	High order questions: divergent open-ended	5	Appreciation
		4	Evaluation
		3	Inferential comprehension
Referential Materials	Low order questions: convergent close-ended	2	Reorganisation
		1	Literal (comprehension)

Exploring Literary Texts (Vethamani, 1998)

questions, which merely require students to convey information to higher-level questions, which require students to interpret the texts This can be achieved by moving away from close-ended questions, which require literal or content information (as indicated in the diagram above). Teachers could start with these questions to ensure students have understood the first level of meaning. They should then go on to dealing with interpretive activities by using open-ended questions.

Using Barrett's Taxonomy Teaching Literary Texts

Barrett's taxonomy (Clymer, 1968) is very applicable for teaching literary texts as it takes into consideration not just the cognitive dimension but also the affective dimension that is an inseparable aspect in the study of literary texts (Tollesfeson, 1989). This taxonomy is divided into five skill categories: (1) literal comprehension, (2) reorganisation, (3) inferential comprehension, (4) evaluation, and (5) appreciation .

I shall provide a comprehensive overview of how this taxonomy can be utilised by the teachers. These five categories are arranged in a hierarchical order of difficulty. While teaching a text, the teacher will have to decide how much time he would require for each category. For certain texts, the teacher may decide to go straight into inferential comprehension because he may consider the text relatively easy for his students. For another, he may have to spend more time at the literal level so that students have a sound understanding of the basic information in the text.

At the first level of literal comprehension, the focus is largely on the students' ability to recognise and recall explicit information. Most of the activities and tasks at this level would revolve around locating, identifying and recalling the relevant information. These activities and tasks are obviously of a low cognitive level but are still essential to the understanding of the texts. Activities and tasks for literal comprehension are broadly divided into recognition and recall sub-categories. These activities require students to recognise and recall details, main ideas, a sequence, comparison, cause and effect relationships, and character traits. Below are some examples.

Example 1: Identifying Details

Read the poem, 'There has been a death in the opposite house' by Emily Dickinson and complete the table below. Some of the boxes have been completed for you.

People Mentioned in the poem	What they do
Neighbours	Rustle in and out
Doctor	
Someone	Hurry by the house
The persona (when a young boy)	
Minister	Walks into the house
	Comes to the house
(the man of the appalling trade)	
(dark parade)	Come to pay respect and for the funeral

Example 2 Recognise and Recall Details

Write true or false next to the statements about the poem.

- There has been a death in the opposite house. _____
- The people are crying loudly. _____
- People do things to help the family of the dead. _____
- Nobody seems to care about the dead person. _____
- People are informed of the death by the local newspapers. _____
- Children seem to be afraid of going near the house
of the dead person. _____
- There is a party for the neighbours. _____
- People who have work to do for the funeral arrive. _____
- People come in buses to watch the funeral. _____
- People seem to be moving about and the only person
who is still is the dead person. _____

At the second level of reorganisation, students are required to analyse, synthesise, and organise the information that is explicitly stated. At this level, students still work with explicit information and are not required to do any interpretation. The tasks and activities for this level include the following: classifying, outlining, summarising and synthesising. To carry out these tasks and activities, students could be required to quote statements from the texts, paraphrase or even translate the writer's statements. For example, in a synthesising task, students could be instructed to consolidate explicit ideas or information from different characters regarding an incident they were all involved in. Below are more examples from Muhammad Haji Salleh's 'Si Tenggang's Homecoming'.

Read the following stanza carefully.

vi
i am not a new man,
not too different
from you;
the people and cities
of coastal ports
taught me not to brood,
over a foreign world
suffer difficulties
or fear possibilities.

i am you,
freed from the village,
its soil and ways,
independent, because
i have found myself.

List four things the persona says about himself. The first has been done for you.

The persona is not a new man.

Complete the paragraph below using the words from the sentences in the earlier exercise and ideas from the stanza given above.

The persona is not a 1. _____ man. He is not very 2. _____ from the other Malays. He has 3. _____ from his travels not to 4. _____ too much over difficulties. He is just 5. _____ the other Malays but he is now 6. _____ from the village and is 7. _____. He has 8. _____ himself.

At the third level, inferential comprehension, students exhibit their ability to utilise explicit information from texts and their intuition and experience to make hypotheses and conjectures. At this level, students' reading needs to be supported by teachers' questioning to help them draw upon their imagination and to lead them beyond the printed page. The inferencing activities for the above purposes can be carried out for inferring: supporting details, main ideas, sequence, comparisons, cause and effect relationships, character traits, outcomes, figurative language.

Below are examples of questions that lead to inferencing questions. Read the following lines from *Monsoon History* from Shirley Lim.

A. List the insects/creatures that are mentioned in the following lines.

The air is wet, soaks
Into mattresses, and curls
In apparitions of smoke.
Like fat white slugs furred

Among the timber,
Or silver fish tunnelling
The damp linen covers
Of schoolbooks, or walking
Quietly like centipedes,
The air walking everywhere
On its hundred feet
Is filled with the glare
Of tropical water.

...

Reading Tennyson, at six
p.m. in pajamas,
Listening to down-pouring
rain: the air ticks
With gnats, black spiders fly,
Moths sweep out of our rooms
Where termites built
Their hills of eggs and queens zoom
In heat.

Creatures mentioned:

Example:

fat white slugs

B. Pick out two creatures mentioned in the lines that are used as comparisons (Hint: look for the word “like” which appears before the creatures). State what the creatures are compared to.

(_____ are compared to _____)

_____ are compared to _____

C. Now write down what you think these comparisons could imply?

The fourth level of evaluation requires the setting of tasks and activities for students which would require them to compare ideas and issues in the text with sources of information outside the text. Students are required, to make evaluation or judgment on matters related to accuracy, acceptability, worth, and even the probability of occurrence.

Below is an example of questions at the evaluation level for Rudyard Kipling's *IF*. Students are required to read the following stanza and answer the questions that follow.

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings- nor lose the common touch
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it:
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

Why do you think time is described as 'unforgiving'?

Do you think that it is possible to follow the persona's advice in this stanza?
Why do you say so?

The final and fifth level of appreciation deals with the psychological and aesthetic impact of the text on students. It requires students to utilise all the cognitive dimensions listed above and requires of the students an emotional response to the aesthetic and artistic elements in the texts. The tasks for this level require an emotional response to the content, identification with characters or incidents, reactions to the writer's use of language and imagery. Below are examples of questions that lead towards the appreciation level.

Read the following lines from Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* and answer the questions that follow.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

1. Who do you think 'thee' is in line 1?

2. What is 'thee' compared to?

3. Why do you think the persona makes this comparison?

4. Do you think the comparison is an effective/appropriate comparison?
Why do you say so?

The questions should move from literal questions to inferential questions to questions related to learners' appreciation of the texts.

I will now show how a poem can be taught for mere reading comprehension and then how it can be drawn further into a meaningful literature lesson which incorpo-

rates the different levels of Barret's taxonomy. Wordsworth's poem, *She Dwelt Among Th' Untrodden Ways* will be used to this purpose.

<i>She dwelt among th' untrodden ways</i>	1
<i>Beside the springs of Dove,</i>	
<i>A maid whom there were none to praise</i>	
<i>And very few to love.</i>	
<i>A Violet by a mossy stone</i>	5
<i>Half-hidden from the Eye!</i>	
<i>Fair, as a star when only one</i>	
<i>Is shining in the sky!</i>	
<i>She liv'd unknown, and few could know</i>	
<i>When Lucy ceas'd to be;</i>	10
<i>But she is in her Grave, and Oh!</i>	
<i>The difference to me.</i>	

The questions below could be asked in a literature lesson that remains at the literal reading comprehension level.

- Question 1 : Provide the meanings of the following words:
dwelt, untrodden, maid, mossy, and ceas'd.
- Question 2 : Where did the girl live?
- Question 3 : What is she compared to?
- Question 4 : What has happened to her?
- Question 5 : What is the name of the girl referred to in line 1?

The above questions do little to engage the reader with the poem. Students do not get the opportunity to interact with the text on a personal level or make any interpretation. The reading of the text in a literature lesson could be drawn to a higher level by using the questions and activities given below.

Activity 1

Answer the following questions.

Who is the 'She' referred to in line 1?

Why do you think the writer did not mention her by name in line 1?

Would it have made any difference if he had? Why do you say so?

Activity 2

1. Complete the table below about what you know and do not know about the girl in the poem.

Things you know about the girl	Things you do not know about the girl

2. Why do you think the writer is silent about some information about the girl?
3. What effect does this have on you?

Activity 3

Understanding comparisons. Answer the following questions.

What is Lucy compared to?

Which is a simile? Why do you say so?

Which is a metaphor? Why do you say so?

What do the comparisons tell you about the persona's perception of Lucy?

Do you think the comparisons are effective? Why?

Activity 4

Making inferences. Answer the following questions.

What is your perception of Lucy? Why do you say so?

What kind of relationship do you think existed between the persona and Lucy? Support your view with appropriate references from the poem.

What would be a possible theme in this poem? Give textual reference to support your choice.

Pick out words in the poem that could suggest the tone in the poem.

Activity 5

The following activity can be used as a post-reading activity to examine the poem.

Students first work in groups and then share each group's discussion as a whole class activity. Students are encouraged to share their thoughts and views with members of their groups.

Discuss the following questions:

Do you think there can be such relationships today as the one in the poem? Why do you say so?

Imagine that a friend or a relative of yours is in the same position as Lucy (before her death). You find out about the persona's love for her. What would you do? Why? Have you read any other poem or short story with a similar theme? Inform the group about it. Which do you prefer? Why?

How has the Internet changed some of the ways people meet nowadays? Is the situation in the poem now more unlikely to happen?

Conclusion

In this article, the nature of the language in literary texts was the focus. In view of this, I have suggested that teachers carry out appropriate activities that take lessons which are at the literal level move towards interpretation of literary texts. This will also enable students to not just understand texts but also experience and enjoy them at a personal level.

The questioning strategies and activities suggested in this article are some ways of reading a text in greater depth and making some interpretations, comparisons, inferences, evaluation and appreciation. These activities will help our students go beyond literal comprehension of the text.

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