

## Skills training in literature class

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**Abstract:** This paper identifies some problems Chinese universities have when they offer English literature as a compulsory course to advanced level English majors. One constructive approach is discussed, and some suggestions on improving literature teaching are put forward.

**Key words:** skill training; literature class

### 1. Introduction

For most English majors in Chinese universities, English literature is offered as a compulsory course at their advanced level language study. This course is in fact an integration of English literary history and selected readings in English literature. The usual practice is that the teacher first provides some information about historical background of literary works selected and then analyses texts, consults the critics, elucidates the points in class and finally dole them out for his students' digestion. This is a strategy that works fairly well for many teachers, for one very important aspect of literature teaching involves the teaching of content, viz. the teaching of textual material found in literary works. However, if judged from a perspective of modern pedagogy, the above approach is a bit too narrow. It makes students dependent on the teacher as expert for an understanding, and an interpretation, of a given text. The result of this, on the one hand, is that students give up their role as direct participants in the discourse that takes place when one reads a literary text, or any text for that matter. On the other hand, the above approach encourages intellectual laziness as learners begin to refuse to think for themselves, expecting instead to be spoon-fed material relevant to passing examination successfully.

In contrast to the approach discussed above, a skill-based approach identifies the procedural and language skills students need in order to respond adequately to different sorts of literary texts. If these skills are effectively taught, then students can gradually acquire what can be called "generative capacity": the ability to generate meaning for themselves when they read literature. Learners must, in the final analysis, be able to talk and write about the text and about their response to it. A skills-based approach serves this purpose by providing students with the tools for deriving for themselves meaning from a text. To provide students with these tools is to be learner-centred, the result of which is a measure of learner independence: independence from the teacher as sole authority in relation to what a text can mean, and teacher's role then becomes one of facilitating the process by which skills can be successfully learnt and applied by students.

### 2. What constitutes a skills-based approach

What then are the relevant skills a student needs to read, and write about literature? In my view, there are

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mainly three broad categories of skills: skills that have to do with perception, skills that pertain to decoding texts and skills concerning encoding information about the text or about one's response to it. What follows is a discussion of each of these categories in terms of the sub-skills they entail.

### **2.1 Perceptual skills**

Perceptual skills are related to the learner's ability to observe and recognize text structure as well as other surface features of the text. This, of course, presupposes that students have already had enough guided exposure to literature to be able to distinguish between different sorts of texts and recognize features of language use in literary discourse.

First of all, learners should, from surface features of texts, be able to tell plays from prose fiction and from poetry, and be able to distinguish the various sub-genres within a given genre. Taking poetry for an example, learners should be able to tell a ballad from a sonnet, and ode, verse written in heroic couplets, free verse and so on.

Then learners should be able to observe unusual features of language use. This involves the ability to recognize both features of language use that deviate from modern standard usage, as in the case of archaisms or departure from standard grammar, as well as features of language use which in ordinary everyday discourse is not employed for the purpose of communication. Two examples in poetry are the use of regular rhythmic patterns we call metre and of identities of sound we call rhyme.

The next sub-skill involves the ability to identify patterns foregrounded in the text. To cite an example from a genre other than poetry, this might, for prose fiction, involve the ability to recognize a recurrent story grammar prevalent in each of the episodes that together constitute a given short story or novel.

Another sub-skill is the ability to observe the presence and use of literary devices, a sub-skill which overlaps what the learner should be able to do in relation to the last two features mentioned above. In addition to looking out for departure from standard usage and / or regularities of patterning, the student should be able to pick out devices such as metaphors and symbols, which well deserve interpretation as a literal reading would almost always result in discourse failure.

### **2.2 Decoding skills**

The need to make sense of the data collected by way of observation and recognition leads on to the next groups of skills, viz. decoding skills. Here, the skills one uses to decode written discourse in general come into play. The learner needs to be able to use schemata, viz. knowledge of the world, including knowledge of literary discourse, as well as knowledge of literary works previously read, textual cues, viz. the data from the text collected by way of observation and description, and reading and thinking skills, to derive meaning from the text. What follows is a discussion of the main aspects of meaning the learner may recover from the text.

One basic aspect of recovering meaning from a text is related to what I.A.Richards has called "making out the plain sense". This refers to the ability to derive the denotative meaning from literary texts. With regard to narrative fiction, for instance, this would refer to the ability to construct accurately the chronological sequence of main events in a given chapter or episode, if not of the entire work. Indeed this is something often required of students when they are asked to give an account of what happens in a short story or in a given section of a novel.

Having come to terms with surface denotation, students also need to infer connotative meaning. Having picked out unusual features of language use, observed patterns foregrounded in the text, noticed the presence of technical devices, the learner should be taught to account for their presence in terms of how they contribute to the connotative layer of meaning in a poem, play, novel or short story. For instance, what is the significance of the

half rhymes in a war poem like Wilfred Owen's, the trebling of the love test episode in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the preponderance of transitive verbs which do not take objects in the first section of William Golding's *The Inheritors*. Answers to these questions can lead to the discovery of themes or of other underlying significance.

Again through a consideration of surface features like diction and syntax, the learner should be taught to infer the writer's relationship to, and attitude towards, his subject matter and his readers. This, of course, refers to fostering in the learner the ability to infer the writer's tone and point of view as well as the ability to use the knowledge of the pragmatics of literary communication. The ability to use the latter must come into play when reading novels in which the novelist frequently breaks the maxim of quality for instance. This maxim of communication contains the injunction not to say what one believes to be false. If the novelist deliberately does this, then the reader should be able to infer that the author might have adopted an ironic stance when providing information about a particular character, event or situation.

This last observation leads to another related skill students need to develop and apply when reading plays or prose fiction. This involves mapping what characters say and do onto the reader's prior knowledge of, or preconceptions about, human nature, so that a character's words and actions can be understood in terms of behaviour pertaining to a schematic stereotype. Characters in plays, novels and short stories are often ambiguous creations embodying at the same time the stereotype as well as an individual. After taking a bearing with regard to the character as a stereotype, for example, a hero, villain, confidante, etc., the reader then analyses with more care of that character in terms of individualized personality traits. These can be obtained by considering the things a character says and does that do not quite fit the stereotype.

Finally, the last decoding skill in my opinion has to do with the ability to make predictions in relation to the text. With regard to narrative fiction and plays students should be able, from text structure and other clues in the text, to engage in prospective thinking. In other words, this involves the ability to anticipate and infer how the story-line or plot, for instance, might develop, or what characters might say or do next or at some later stage when confronted with a particular set of circumstances. With regard to poetry, the recognition of sub-genre categories might lead the learner to activate schemata in relation to the context and tone of a given poem. If the poem is an ode, for instance, the reader might then expect the poem to contain ruminative discourse in which personal emotion on the part of the poet is united to general meditation on some philosophical or aesthetic idea.

### **2.3 Encoding skills**

The study of literature is incomplete without the ability to write about texts or about aspects of texts. However, this aspect of literature teaching seems to have been regrettably neglected. Teachers learnt the fact that though students seem to understand a text when they discuss it orally in class, they have much difficulty with written assignments and tests which require them to write in continuous prose. The reason for this is, very likely, the absence of direct instruction in writing about literature. If students are to be able to express in writing what they think about a text clearly and succinctly they have to be consciously taught how to do this and in this way teaching writing means teaching skills.

The relevant skills in relation to writing about literature are not so much different from those set out as functional objectives for writing compositions found in the English language syllabus. What follows is a brief description of each of these.

At a basic level, students should be able to express their ideas about, or response to, a text accurately and correctly in standard English. To do this students should have a reasonable command of vocabulary and sentence

patterns, as well as of appropriate literary critical terms, in order to articulate what they perceive in a text and their response to these impressions.

Students should also be able to write adequately on a given topic in relation to a text. This involves discussing relevant ideas in relation to the topic with adequate elaboration as well as with textual substantiation.

Have decided on what they have to say about a given topic, students should also be able to write coherently and cohesively. This means organizing their writing with the appropriate modes or structures and connecting their ideas with the use of appropriate linking devices. Then, of course, students should be able to introduce the topic under discussion clearly and round off their writing with a neat and logical conclusion.

Last but not the least, students should be able to write in a style which uses the appropriate conventions of writing about literary texts and to draft, revise, and edit their writing so that expression becomes more accurate and the ideas more refined. Here, process writing skills come into play.

### 3. Conclusion

These then are the main skills students can develop and apply when they study literature. However, if these skills are to be accepted as desirable teaching and learning objectives, then syllabus designers, teacher trainers, teachers and examiners should take into consideration when drawing up syllabuses, defining lesson objectives, formulating examination questions and devising methods and techniques respectively.

Where the syllabus is concerned, syllabus writers should attempt to describe a specification of skills students have to develop and apply when studying literature, in addition to a listing of generic categories and specific works to be taught.

With regard to the teacher, he or she might wish to think of lessons or units objectives in terms of skills students should be able to develop and apply. How successfully students can apply the skills defined in lesson objectives will provide teachers with some important feedback of how successful a lesson has been taught and learnt.

Finally, in relation to tests and examinations, examiners might define what is to be tested not only in terms of content but also in terms of skills as well. Tests will then examine not only what students can remember about what has been said about a given topic but also what students can perceive and respond to when confronted with an unfamiliar text.

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(Edited by SHI Li-fang and REN Li-ping)