

From the Teaching of Language to the Teaching of Literature:

Towards Collaboration Between Teachers of Foreign Languages and Literature.

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One of the major projects to improve working relationships among teachers of different disciplines in the specialized areas of EFL teaching focuses on the transition between language and literature teachers.

Prior to setup the intended results of such collaboration between teachers of those two different disciplines, one should discuss the long standing tendency to widen the division between the teaching of the foreign language and of foreign literatures. The pattern, indeed usually runs the following course.

Literature specialists accuse the pedagogues of overstressing the development of communicative competence to the detriment of guiding students towards the merits of literary analysis and appreciation. Moreover, pedagogues are blamed not only for widening the gap between language and literature courses but, in some instances, for creating it. Pedagogues, on the other hand, applaud the progress made in the development of aural/ oral skill over the last decade and the relinquishment, on the part of many educators, of the outdated preference for a literary focus for the majority of students. Commenting on this critical issue, Marshall C. Olds and Normand Lamoureux have discussed the impact of the working relationships among teachers of different disciplines on the future.

In the case of teaching French language, Olds lamented that “we are pursuing a course of ever sharper division between the study of French language and that of French Literature” (Olds, 1984: 215-22). Lamoureux’s expected idea is that, “as we help our students to develop their oral and written expression, we can also lead them to realize ultimately that language is not an end in itself but rather an effective means of communication, and, properly understood and utilized, a true aesthetic device for the artistic expression of thought.” (Lamoureux, 1984:273)

At this point, Lamoureux’s view is a dream indeed, and its realization seems highly unlikely since the inclusion of nay literary reading materials (eg. Poems, short stories ...etc) in basic skill courses has virtually been abandoned.

In fact, Beatie, Martin, and Oberst recently concluded: “students today mostly encounter one style of writing: textbook author-composed reading paragraphs. Because these passages are not designed primarily for teaching reading, but rather to reinforce grammatical structures or vocabulary, they may be characterized by a lack

of appropriate style.” The authors go on to argue that the best selection of reading material for the basic four-skills text offers the students a challenge best found in “authentic language samples”, that is, written language produced by native speakers to be re-read by native speakers. This kind of “authentic language” of advertisements, television programs, literary selections, journal articles rarely appears in the students’ basic text except as peripheral realia.

The transition between language and literature courses is difficult enough and is not helped by virtual abandonment of literature in language texts and courses. For the past decade, most textbook publishers have looked upon literature, even in the form of short lyrical poems or songs, as an unwanted and unnecessary intrusion in an oral proficiency-oriented text. Where did they ever receive such a notion? It came from pedagogues who, with the best intentions, called for functional dialogues, contextualized grammar drills; open-ended creative reinforcement activities, culture capsules expanded to include the Anglophone world, and standardized measurements to evaluate oral proficiency.

Innovative approaches to the acquisition and learning of a foreign language have proliferated over the last century, and they have passed the test of filtering down the classroom textbook. It is now time to bring literature back to its proper place in the first and second year curricula.

This is not to say that the high school or advanced levels curricula should be readjusted to primarily a literary focus. As Grittner explains, “Perhaps, one of the greatest travesties of foreign language education has resulted from the premature reading of literature...The grinding, drudgery, of looking up several dozen words per page may be dear to the tradition of the ‘grim’ humanist; but the process bears little resemblance to anything that, in the native language, might be called reading” (Frank Grittner, *Teaching Foreign Languages*, 2nd ed. 1977, p.247)

However, as Knop points out, the reading of literature need not to be done in total isolation from language learning per se. She stresses the point that structural analysis and vocabulary work are legitimate activities which can even add to the understanding and appreciation of a literary work.

She argues that “the use of word families, context clues, and inferencing can serve the goals of literary appreciation while, at the same time, being used to review and expand students’ guessing ability and knowledge of the language. Discussing a literary work, in oral and written form, can concurrently serve the purpose of developing students’ skills in self-expression and communication” (“The Study of Literature in the Foreign language Program” in Grittner, 1977: 285)

What is truly needed is a sharing of experience. Language teachers are best able to describe the level of literature appropriate for students learning the fundamentals

of a language. Literature specialists can tell language teachers how to approach and help students understand a piece of literature and appreciate its full value.

At the elementary level, pedagogical interest has mainly concentrated on how to teach students to read through the use of contextual clues, decoding, inferencing, etc. This skill development is important. However, as Lamoureux suggests, "in the process of teaching the reading skill, the instructor can go beyond considerations of grammar and general comprehension questions to topics which constitute an initiation to literature appropriate to this level" (Lamoureux, 1984, p.273)

Such topics could include the discovery of elements that create humour in a poem or sadness in a short story.

Having taught 2nd year foreign language learners literature for ten years and Reading comprehension for just one year, I have found that with the proper leading questions, beginning students can discover theme and distinguish it from plot; they can also trace characterization as an example. In fact, students enjoy this kind of "supplementary" work and evaluate it as a welcome diversion from much of the drill work in the classroom where there is usually a right or wrong response. The current problem is that collaboration between textbook authors and literature specialists is needed not only to insure the inclusion of some literature in the first year text but to guide the language teacher and students through some fundamentals of literary analysis.

At least, progress in that kind of collaboration is now underway at the intermediate level. Schofer, a specialist in literature and film, is now collaborating with an author of a second year grammar review text in order to adapt to this level a technique Schofer employs successfully in this undergraduate introduction to literature courses. Basically, he asks his advanced students in literature, in a pre-reading stage, to act as authors and to write, which forces them to use literary techniques actively and to discover how certain literary notions function.

As an example, before reading a text infused with realism of the nineteenth-century novel, for instance, students write a description of a room, suggesting how the room reflects the person living in it. Then to teach point of view and narrative distance, "different groups of students adopt different narrative stances: a third-person narrative told thirty years after having seen the room, a description in the present inside the room, a scene described by the room's inhabitant" (Peter Schofer, 1984: 468).

All of us language teachers know or should know the importance of pre-reading activities. Beatie and al. conclude:

"Readers always approach material, whether in the native or foreign language, with a set of expectations about its order, content, and point of view. Pre-reading

exercises which help the student to develop such expectations in the foreign language not only facilitate the development of good reading skills and permit the student to read much more sophisticated materials than can be the case without such preparation, but also strengthen intellectual skills such as pattern perception, hypothesis formation, and deduction.” (Bruce Beatie, “Reading in the First-Year Textbook: A syllabus for textbook authors”, in Modern Language Journal, Vol.68, 1984, p.206)

Here is a type of pre-reading technique used by Schofer that has its roots in literary analysis. Santoni, also a literature specialist, recognized the importance of pre-reading activities for literature. Unfortunately, his voice went largely unheeded. Let us not make the same mistake again.

Teaching second-year English, he uses a basic grammar review text and supplement it with a literary reader that introduces students to authentic literary texts in their entirety. Because of the significant amount of basic textbook material to cover weekly, students are forced to read selections from the literary reader independently as homework assignments. In order to guide their reading, he has students read a fable and actually writes one using the elements that characterize the genre: repetition, simplicity, symbolic characterization. Even though their fables contain many grammatical errors, they do actively learn and use the literary notions that help distinguish a fable as a unique form of literature.

Another example: one of the short stories that the students read deals with the supernatural and a magic lamp. In order to help them discover about organization of narration, he asks them to write a short story of one or two pages in which there is a magic object which will do as it is commanded. After reading each other’s narration, they discuss what makes some of the short stories easier to understand than others, i.e., the organization of the narration (discovery of the object, effect of the object, consequence of the object’s magic). They then look for these elements in the short story in the reader. These exercises are helpful in understanding how an author functions, and students find them more interesting than answering a list of who-what-where-why questions on a text as homework.

These are simple examples of how collaborations between linguistic and literary training need not mean a return to basic texts filled with grammar-translation exercises followed by short literary excerpts. Such step is unlikely given the apparent legitimacy of teaching toward proficiency in the basic skills and toward cultural understanding.

Before the pendulum swings too widely, the urgent message to my colleagues is that the time is ripe to broaden our students’ horizon and to enrich their foreign language experience by allowing authentic samples of literature a proper place in the curriculum. That project will come true only if collaboration between those two

disciplines is secured. But the current situation is that students will continue to falter, or perhaps, fail in the transition between language and literature.

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