An Apparatus:
Teaching literature through language & vice versa

Emma DAWSON & Odette VASSALLO
The University of Nottingham

In choosing texts to teach as literature or to teach language through literature, one may find that teachers feel uncomfortable using literature that is 'linguistically or culturally obscure'. Linguistically, this 'obscurity' may be manifested through variant grammar and syntactical structures, use of 'foreign' lexemes or non-standard use of punctuation. Culturally, the literature may present ideas, concepts or mentalities far removed from the host environment and far removed from the teacher's own cultural and social knowledge.

What we are faced with here are questions of **how** to teach linguistically 'variant' literature as well as **who** to teach literature containing elements of cultural (social/religious) specificity.

The questions of **how** and **who** may be tackled through the use of a particular apparatus for the reading of such 'variant' literatures. What is being suggested here is the adoption of a stylistics-based checklist which can help both teacher and student in their approach to these texts. It focuses on the students' needs and facilitates the design of a task-based apparatus for literary texts. The following is an example of such an apparatus whereby we demonstrate how one may teach a 'variant' literary text whilst meeting specific teaching objectives in language and literature.

The approach exposes the student to a structured approach to literary texts and thus serves as a guide both to the organisation of the analysis and the way in which it can be applied to a wide spectrum of texts. Below is a copy of the apparatus itself based on the chosen literary text: 'Jesus Is Indian', a short story by Agnes Sam (1989), illustrating how this can be achieved. Following the apparatus is a detailed account (rationale) concerning the decisions made in creating the apparatus with certain objectives in mind. The apparatus is based on John McRae's stylistic checklist (McRae, 1991).

Apparatus

Pre-reading

"Who invented school? Who said little children must sit still in a desk pretending they wide awake when they dreaming of comics and swings and stealing fruit from Mrs Mumble?" (Sam, 1989)

1. What type of sentence is used here?
2. Whose point of view may this be? How do you come to this conclusion?

First reading
1. Who is 'I' in the second paragraph? /What kind of narrator is used in the text?
2. What/Who is '*Hama*'?
3. Who is in the classroom with Angelina?
4. Why is the word sister written with a capital 'S'?

Second reading
1. What do you notice as 'unusual' about the layout technique(s)?
2. In your opinion,
    a. what effect do the brackets have on the narrative?

      b.   what effect does the use of italics have on the narrative?

      c.   other than the use of brackets and italics, what other typographical form is used in the passage? To what effect?

3.   Look at page 25, lines 15 – 37. What does this passage reveal to you about the relationship between Sister and Angelina? What tells you this?

4.   Continue to explore the relationship using the following….

Sister Bonaventura	Angelina
Teacher	student
……	……
……	……

5.   Look at the following:

Honey and I fight like tigers. Scratching. Biting. Spitting. Kicking. Pinching. Pulling hair.

      What are your thoughts on the sentence structure?

6.   What are your thoughts on Sister's definition of *tokoloshe*?

7.   Making reference to the text,

      a.   how would you describe Angelina's perception of herself?

      b.   what is Angelina's idea of a girl of whom Sister would not be critical ?

Discussion & Tasks

- Rewrite the passage found in brackets (page 25, 2nd paragraph) and the passage in italics (page 28, last paragraph) into Standard English.
- Dramatise from page 32 last line to page 33 line 13.
- Carry out research to find out how and when the Indian population came to be in South Africa.

The Rationale:
How and why the apparatus is created in this way

As mentioned previously we shall now turn to look in some detail at the reasons for the apparatus being designed the way that it is. We shall consider the various phases step by step as you have seen on the apparatus itself. We shall also make reference to McRae's (1991: 95-96) stylistic checklist in order to highlight certain linguistic features that the student would be made aware of (albeit subtly).

As a matter of interest, the (McRae) checklist follows:

- lexis (words)
- syntax (how the words are put together)
- cohesion (the linking mechanisms within the text)
- phonology (sounds)
- graphology (the look, and visual effects)
- semantics (areas of meaning and how the meaning is achieved)
- dialect (usually spoken variants of standard English
- register (tone)
- period (archaisms, fusions of genre, etc.)
- function ('message', 'author's intention', etc.)

Pre-Reading

Let us begin by looking at the Pre-reading phase. The first two sentences of the short story are revealed. The function of the Pre-Reading is to:

- introduce the theme of the text
- draw attention to the linguistic variety inherent in this particular text

- draw attention to the possible dominant point of view in the story.

Linguistically, the Pre-reading questions focus the student's attention on:
- syntax, semantics & graphology – Question 1
- lexis & register - Question 2

First Reading

The next phase is the First Reading, whose function is to introduce the reader to the text for the first time, checking basic comprehension of the text through lower-order questions.

For the First Reading the apparatus asks the reader to read alone, silently.

This allows the reader to interact with the text on a more personal level; hearing the voice(s) of the text in the head. Equally, it presents a more direct approach to the text, eliciting an instinctive response to it.

In terms of basic text comprehension, by using lower-order questions (Carter & Long, 1991) the reader has the opportunity to get a clear view of the basic story line and characters. This is not restricting personal interpretation in any way; one cannot move to the level of interpretation if the basic elements of the story have not been properly understood.

Linguistically, the First Reading phase focuses the student's attention on:
- the function of the 'first person singular' & narrative perspective - Question 1
- lexical variety - Question 2
- lexis & grammatical awareness – providing 'orientational information' (Emmott, 1999) for the reader who is still constructing the text in their virtual world - Question 3
- graphology, lexis & semantics - Question 4

Second Reading

The next phase is the Second Reading. The function of this phase is to revisit the text with the basic comprehension in place and to move towards a deeper understanding of how the text means.

For the Second Reading the apparatus asks the reader to read aloud. Why? Reading aloud acts as a re-enactment of the text:

> An effective reading aloud by the teacher can also serve to clarify difficulties: difficult words can be 'enacted' and unclear or complex syntax can be unravelled in the process of an oral dramatisation.
>
> (Carter & Long 1991:82)

This phase is also an arena for the exploration of language devices used for literary effects; at this point we move from 'lower-order' to 'higher-order' questions.

Linguistically, the Second Reading phase focuses the student's attention on:
- graphology & function - Questions 1 and 2
- lexis, syntax, semantics, graphology, register & function - Question 3
- lexis & semantics (Exploration of lexical field) - Question 4
- lexis, graphology, syntax, semantics & function - Question 5
- lexical variety & function - Question 6
- lexis, syntax, graphology, register & function - Question 7

Discussion & Tasks

This phase is the final phase of the apparatus and is an ideal opportunity to explore further 'readings' such as: cultural, socio-cultural, political, post-colonial, feminist, and other readings.

This would obviously depend on what the teacher decides to do, the aim of the lesson or where the students would like to take it.

It also provides an opportunity to research an extended topic that may have been mentioned or focussed on through the text. Further exploration could also be carried out on thought and speech presentation through textual intervention such as rewriting tasks that enable students to gain a sharper appreciation of textual effects by means of trying out alternative stylistic choices (for more textual intervention suggestions see Pope 1995).

Concluding Remarks

What we have addressed in this apparatus are the first four pages of the short story, which we used as a point of entry for the rest of the text. Any part of a short story can be selected as a point of entry; it is a question of which part or parts of the text would be suitable as a breaking-off point which would motivate the students to read on and discover more.

However, the most valuable aspect of the apparatus – and the stylistic approach to texts in general - is its usefulness as a tool in any cultural context. Whether the target group is EFL, ESL or First Language, it serves the purpose of helping the students find 'a way in' to the text and empowering them by equipping them with the tools that they will be able to apply to the text at other levels of interpretation. Consequently, the students will examine the linguistic features of the text in order to justify their readings. Furthermore, teachers are also empowered by the possibility of having a wider selection of texts in English from all over the world which possess unlimited cultural richness that could be introduced in various international contexts. These can in turn be exploited in class either through a language- or literature-based approach; the focus of the apparatus presented here is on the latter.

Here is a fusion between the 'linguistically or culturally obscure' and the 'diverse and multilevel interpretations' that can be present in any literary text. The aim of any literature class should be to seek to equip the student with the necessary tools to explore the text, interpret and finally justify their interpretation by making direct reference to the text without having to rely on 'authorities'. This is a way of looking closely at 'linguistic features' which can explain the 'effects' generated by the text. Increased language awareness in the analytical approach to literary texts will make the student sensitive to the way language is used in a literary text, thus boosting their confidence on the way to more formal critical approaches and beyond:

> …it is usually more important that participants in a given session gain confidence from being able to achieve something they can value as a learning experience than that they have been presented with texts of a higher level of difficulty which only confirm their diffidence at being unable to carry out the prescribed tasks effectively.
>
> (Carter & McRae, 1999:72)

References

Carter, R. and Long, M. N. (1991), *Teaching Literature*, Harlow: Longman.

Carter, R. and McRae, J. (1999), *Language, Literature and the Learner: Creative Classroom Practice*, London: Longman.

Emmott, C. (1999), *Narrative Comprehension*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McRae, J. (1991), *Literature with a small 'l'*, London: Macmillan.

Pope, R. (1995), *Textual Intervention, Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, London: Routledge, Interface Series.

Sam, A. (1989) *Jesus Is Indian And Other Stories* Oxford: Heinemann Publishers.