

## Modes of Reading Literary Texts in a Foreign Language in Intercultural Perspective

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... it is up to the reader to see to it that literature exerts its critical force, and that this can occur independently of the author's intentions. (Calvino 26)

In this paper I consider an assumption that reading literary texts in a foreign language-and-culture classroom implies, in a first instance, the individual interaction developed between reader and text. In a second instance, reading is located in the classroom as personal readings are shared, discussed and modified. Therefore, our point of departure must be reading (allowing some time to *convalesce* as an important factor to consider) and the subsequent approach should take place on the basis of the *response* to literature that follows or, in other words, on the outcome of reading.

Brumfit and Carter point out that literature is not self-explanatory by nature and discuss the need of supplying the foreign learner-reader with background information<sup>1</sup> in order to enhance a fuller cultural understanding of the literary text. Contrasting with this position, it is pertinent to see how Soter balances the question of the importance of 'background knowledge' in the perspective of reader-response theories. Very significantly the author establishes a parallel between a reader and a traveller:<sup>2</sup>

... we could consider the literary journey as comparable to the physical one we take when venturing to another country and culture. No matter how much we may prepare ourselves, arm ourselves with information about the unfamiliar culture, we can be sure of encountering the unpredictable; we can be sure of our own surprise expressed perhaps in terms of "But it

wasn't in the guidebook!" We can also be overprepared. Armed with too much preliminary information, we may seek to find what will confirm our "prior knowledge" (albeit limited). Such information may function as a frame or a lens through which the actual is then perceived. We may, therefore, be so preoccupied with confirming what "the guidebook" said that we miss the opportunity for the experience to speak directly to us . . . . (Soter 226)

Although I agree with the need of supplying additional texts in specific cases (Delanoy; Kuna), it is important to clarify two points. Firstly, what is the concept of 'culture' that is at stake? From the examples that Brumfit and Carter give we believe that they implicitly mean products and behaviours, not necessarily comprehending intrinsic values and attitudes.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this approach to reading may actually prove itself inadequate in terms of an intercultural perspective sustained by reader-response theories. The authors seem to not differentiate between concepts of "reading" and reading in a foreign language is necessarily different from reading in the mother tongue or in the first language (assuming equal 'fluency' in the corresponding foreign 'culture' or 'cultures' in the plural): we read differently in a foreign language and we read differently from our students. If one of the premises proposed by these authors is that reading must take place in the first instance, then I would agree with Dasenbrock that "to annotate the unannotated text would be to prevent the students from experiencing the meaning of the work" (44). As Sell puts it: "Styles of reading involving some kind of historical or cultural purism – the assumption that a text's significance is never more than its significance in its original context – are uncondusive to the dialogicality of genuine communication" (21). Dasenbrock, for instance, adds an argument for the value of reading a literary text from a foreign perspective:

The informed position is not always the position of the richest or most powerful experience of a work of art. And this becomes even more true when crossing cultural barriers: the unknown can be powerful precisely because it is unknown. But this is not to defend ignorance, to defend remaining unknowledgeable. For one can see something for the first time only once; after that, the choice is to become more knowledgeable, more expert, more informed, or to stay uninformed without the intense pleasure of initial acquaintance. (Dasenbrock 39)

The author is justifying the uses of the study of literary texts against the arguments used by some which are directed against it, as Broich put it: “This means that in a course on literature it will not do to begin with a brief introduction to the ‘background’ and then, with a sigh of relief, forget about it and devote oneself entirely to a close reading of ‘the’ texts” (27).

Pertinently, Kramersch locates one of the difficulties noted in reading literature in a foreign language in the chosen reading mode: “Indeed, the frequent disappointment of intermediate language learners may stem from the fact that they are asked to read efferently as stories texts that yield their best when read aesthetically as discourses” (*Context and Culture* 124). The fact that the students are concentrated on the information provided by the text, makes them feel ‘incompetent’ readers as they feel their knowledge of the foreign culture is insufficient. As Kramersch notes well, and unlike what Brumfit and Carter seemed to be saying, what they are overlooking is not additional information “but an awareness of their own frame of reference and of their dialogue with the text during the reading process” (*Context and Culture* 124). Usually missing in the foreign language classes is the cultural context of interaction of the reader with the literary text and the awareness that the reader’s experience as ‘non-native’ reader is useful in experiencing the text. As Dasenbrook suggested above, the ‘foreignness’ of the texts, in the perspective of the students, may reveal different capacities and perspectives in understanding those texts. A pedagogical (intercultural) advantage may ensue: “Rather than be the object of correction or even ridicule, these [cultural discrepancies] should be exploited as a unique mirror to the particular reader’s perspective and contrasted with the response of other readers at other times under other circumstances” (Kramersch, *Context and Culture* 128).

Therefore the question arises as to the kind of reading that learners are expected to perform and this may be located in two different poles: either ‘efferent’ or ‘aesthetic’.<sup>4</sup> According to Rosenblatt, ‘efferent’ reading situates the text in a web of concepts supplied by teachers, critics and the norms of the reader’s culture (445). ‘Aesthetic’ reading involves a lived relationship with the text itself. Put thus, the dichotomy is simplistic; nonetheless, the teacher has to determine what type of reading should be stressed. The purposes of the reading should be evident in the activities that follow it. Purves identifies a number of purposes for reading

(ludic, efferent, aesthetic, proactive, spiritual, hermeneutic, ritual)<sup>5</sup> and notes that during the act of reading purposes may change and may be multiple and simultaneous (351).

I advocate that the teacher should work within a reader-response framework that privileges an aesthetic reading of literary texts and, along the continuum of these different modes of reading, plays down the efferent purpose. As Bredella has noted (in "Literary Texts"), the aesthetic reading experience is pedagogically significant for it allows us to explore how the reader is affected by the text, and what the 'response' might be. Here there is an opportunity to direct the reader's attention to his/her images of the other and of oneself and to explore the dual process of involvement and detachment. This happens as the reader participates in this imagined world while at the same time observes his/her own involvement. This reflective element connecting reader and text encourages the adoption of different points of view and broadens the readers' horizons.

Very roughly we would say that 'response' here refers to the interaction that develops between reader and text and between different readers of a common text. From this it does not follow that a response is necessarily individual and contestable, becoming solipsistic as the learners use the text to confirm their own reality which they are unable to see beyond. As Bredella notes, "[the] aesthetic experience does not begin until our projections and experiences undergo a change" ("The anthropological" 4), and as a dialogue with the text starts it will open up new possibilities, questions, creative doubts: "Being intercultural needs this dialectic which is part of the aesthetic experience" (Bredella, "Afterword" 230). In this disquieting place meaning emerges dynamically and it implies a re-evaluation of otherness and relocation in our individual mappings.

Kramersch refers to "faultlines"; "conflict"; "rupture points" (in *Context and Culture*) and, more recently (in "From Practice to Theory"), employs the phrase "telling moments". These are meant to reveal differences in perception in the dialogues that learners establish with texts, provoking new insights born from the confrontation. In our terms, Kramersch is stimulating the emergence of a 'compound voice'<sup>6</sup> thus making students realise areas that are unclear, ambiguous, and making them note how meaning is changed and conveyed by the choice and use of words in a particular context.

In addition to this, I propose that this 'compound voice' may be found *inside* literary texts and offer a pretext for reflection on the intercultural (dis)encounters portrayed and the struggle that they prefigure. The process of acting, or not, interculturally may be mirrored in literature and a compound voice makes it more visible.

It is in this context that we will suggest a selection of texts that may signal a tension, points of rupture that may be identified by the presence of a 'compound voice'.

Briefly then, a compound voice can play a role in reading literary texts in two different dimensions: the narrative world of the characters and the readers' response to this world. Regardless of being labelled post-colonial or travel literature, and although I agree with some authors who argue convincingly in favour of using these texts to promote intercultural understanding (cf., for instance, Bredella, "Literary Texts"), I also believe that literary texts of different genres present the opportunity to interpret such passages critically. The ultimate goal of intercultural communication being understanding, this is the potential of the literary text.

However, as teachers and educators, we cannot assume that literature alone will bring forth these enlightened, redemptive properties in our students. As educators engaged in what could be called intercultural literacy, we promote literary competence by helping develop interpretive and analytical skills that may assist the learner read and understand otherness beyond the literary text as he/she comes in contact with different forms of representing the world, be it through language or otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude I would like to offer an example of a compound voice speaking from a poem:

### **Another Language**

Writing was to build on paper;  
To speak was to make things out of air,  
To see was to take light, and shape it  
Into something that was never there.

Patrick McGuinness.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I find it pertinent at this point to contrast the notion of 'background knowledge' with that of 'context'. According to Kuna, "[c]ontext is . . . not what you can put into 'introductions' or footnotes, i.e. mere 'background', an amorphous, *ad hoc* arrangement of so-called extra-literary facts" (269).

<sup>2</sup> The element of 'unpreparedness' characteristic of intercultural learning is also described in terms of comparing learners to travellers in Kramersch's words: "As intercultural speakers, learners are likely to engage their teachers in a voyage of discovery that they had not always anticipated and for which they don't always feel prepared" (30).

<sup>3</sup> Phipps and Gonzalez' observation is timely: "Culture in modern languages has long been understood as literature with some elements of background" (42).

<sup>4</sup> Iser also establishes a distinction between two contrasting modes of reading. He first identifies a referential approach in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which, according to the author, is explained by the functional importance that literature (and the literary critic) fulfilled then, associated with the acquisition of knowledge. This type of reading produces referential meaning, implying a clear division between subject and object. The second approach implies a substantially different relationship between text and reader, and therefore leads to a different quality of meaning taken no longer as "an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced" (10).

<sup>5</sup> Attridge, for instance, advocates what could be called 'responsible reading' "an alertness to its singular otherness, an attentiveness to the way it operates through mobile forms as well as by thematic representation and conceptual argument, will result in a fuller, more responsible response and in an enhanced possibility of change in the future" (34).

<sup>6</sup> The term is borrowed from Sauerberg.

<sup>7</sup> As Lehtonen notes, literacy is a social activity by character and, therefore, acquiring literacy means to transfer from one world to another and in more ways than one (53).

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