

Literary Literacy: Why Read Literary Texts in the English Language Classes?

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There are many models of English teacher and there are competing ideas about the aims of English teaching. But I am not going to discuss them or even suggest that one is better over the other, because every teaching context is different, every literary text is different and every theory to interpret the literary text is different. These topics of discussion have been long-standing and continuing but it is not my intention to provide answers for all these issues. Rather it is my intention to debate the importance of reading literary texts in the English language classes and suggest an alternative way to read literary works.

On a recent survey (2006) to nearly 100 students of English and Portuguese Literature, Language and Culture at Universidade Nova de Lisboa [New University of Lisbon], the results have showed that the answer “love of literature” comes in a very low position as far as the choice to do this degree is concerned; in fact, only 18% of these applicants to teacher have declared it. The main reason why these potential teachers of English have chosen to do a degree in English and Portuguese Literature, Language and Culture was the fact they had good results in English as a Second Language while they studied at Secondary School (45%).

Although this was not an extensive survey, in the sense that only students from Universidade Nova were questioned, these results may help explain why some teachers are reluctant to work with literary texts in their English language classes.

But why is it important to read literary texts in the English language classes? It is important, because:

- a) it is authentic and culturally valued material (Lazar 14-17; Collie, and Slater 3-4);

- b) it expands students' awareness of the structure of the language both at *usage* level (knowledge of linguistic rules) and *use* level (how to use those rules to communicate efficiently) (Moss 14; McKay 191);
- c) it expands their vocabulary (Lazar 17-18; Collie, and Slater 4-5);
- d) it is an opportunity for students to become receptive to different cultures (Lazar 16-17);
- e) it develops students' interpretative skills (Lazar 19);
- f) it helps them to express themselves creatively and imaginatively. As W.T. Littlewood says: "The reader's creative (or rather, 'co-creative') role, and the imaginative involvement engendered by this role, encourage a dynamic interaction between reader, text and external world, in the course of which the reader is constantly seeking to form and retain a coherent picture of the world of the text" (qtd. in Brumfit 14-15);
- g) students that read literary texts have access to a vast and diverse range of human experience and reflection and that helps them learn about human relationships and understand more about themselves (Collie, and Slater 5-6);
- h) it motivates students to become enthusiastic readers, because, as we all know, a good book has the power of absorbing and fascinating the reader until the end of the plot is revealed and that will surely motivate students to read more. Besides, it is a fact that the more you read, the more you want and love to read and unfortunately statistics reveal that most students do not have reading habits. As a matter of fact, the results of the above mentioned survey have also showed that even among university students of Literature, less than half (42%) read fiction on a regular basis, and about 30% of these students rarely read fiction either national or foreigner.

How to improve students' literary literacy

Despite the many debates on the various methods to teach English language, there is a consensus that the job of the English teacher is to enable each child to become more literate (Davison xxi). Although there is not a unique definition of what constitutes literacy, we know that

in today's fast-changing world literacy means far more than learning to read and write in order to perform specific tasks. Some thinkers advocate literacy as the main propeller for economic growth (H. Graff) and others see it as a guarantee for democracy (Stevens) but, overall, literacy is associated with empowerment of individuals and, ultimately, societies, through the improvement of quality of life and culture at large. And at society level, new kinds of literacy are constantly evolving.

Regarding literary literacy, it can be identified with "critical literacy", and this is the ability to recognise and understand certain conventions of language, the ability to read the words on a literary text, and produce literary meaning (Schleppegrell 2). In other words: "the fundamental ability of a good reader of literature is the ability to generalise from the given text either to other aspects of the literary tradition or to personal or social significances outside literature" (Brumfit 188). According to this definition, the meaning is not inherent in texts and it is the reader who creates it in his interaction with the text.

And English language classes can provide a huge contribute to help students achieve literary literacy by:

- firstly, exposing them to literary texts;
- secondly, developing their understanding of the processes of language whereby meanings are made;
- and thirdly, enabling students to create meaning (West, and Dickey 10, 23).

Specially because in literary texts, "meaning is self-contained in the language but it is not to be discovered by appeal to neat, simple, conventional formulas" that can be taught and learned (Brumfit, and Carter 14). Consequently, it is essential that the students get more often exposed to this kind of reading that will help them "search both backwards and forwards, in and across and outside the text for clues which might help to make sense of it" (Brumfit, and Carter 14).

In addition to this, by reading literary works students will enhance their critical skills at all levels. As Gerald Graff says in his 2003 book *Clueless in Academe*, students tend to always accept everything they read in a text, without much of a critical attitude. Therefore, Graff refers that when, for instance, they find textual contradictions in the text they assume that the problem is theirs and never think that the writer might have probably made a mistake: "I realised that the

students had imbibed the assumption that great writers don't make mistakes (and if a text is assigned in school it must be great), so if textual contradictions appear, they must have been deliberately planted in order to force readers to use their ingenuity to resolve them" (G. Graff 68).

Why do a large number of secondary school students tend to reject or have difficulties reading literary texts?

To start with, if someone experiments difficulties in doing something, the most likely is that he or she may give up doing it. So, perhaps one of the ways to solve this dilemma is to encourage students to read literary works. The continuous reading experience will surely help students become less intimidated and more familiar with literature. Therefore, diminishing the anxieties that may be associated with this type of reading, which sometimes is seen as too hard to read and/or too intellectual for them.

A strategy that may contribute to enhance students' will and ability to read literature: reading literary texts online, in other words, reading hyperfiction

We live in a fast-changing world where technology plays an important role and we teach teenagers – the twenty-first century readers – who are eager for novelty and immediate things whose result can be seen almost on the spot. And all this can work as an advantage in English classes.

If we compare the time and the technology available when most of us were in school, we can see how things have drastically changed. In fact, like John Moss states: "new technologies are having an accelerating impact in the understanding of what it is to be literate and how literacy is achieved" (14). And in this context, literacy cannot be thought as something stable and unchangeable.

What is being suggested here is that the nature of some of the English skills students must develop, namely "reading and writing", are changing because there is a new form of writing (computer writing) which inevitably results in a new form of reading. Writing used to be a much slower and laborious activity than it is now, when a simple click can erase a whole text, can

insert extra text while the computer shifts the other text to fit it in, a spelling check can help avoid many mistakes, another simple click can insert an image and/or a diagram and, finally, a printer can produce an immaculate piece of writing.

The same thing happens to reading. Perhaps not in such obvious way, for we still read books and carry them with us. But there has also been an enormous change as far as reading is concerned. First of all, there are much more books available, and many more ways of getting books. During my school and university years, the quickest student to leave the class would be the one getting the book from the library (usually the only copy available). Nowadays, loans between libraries, reading or ordering books online and supermarkets selling cheaper books have made things much easier.

Apart from all that, the biggest change in reading is in the nature of the text itself which means that it is now possible to read any text – a novel or a short story, for example – on a computer screen. In fact, modern digital technologies have generated a new world for the written word. Besides, new computer technologies are making available pre-twentieth century literary works which were sometimes difficult to find.

Therefore, it is only natural to think that the technological developments propelled a paradigm shift in the reading practices as well as in the nature of literacy. In other words, there has been a change from a paradigm characterised by stable/material presence and linearity – the text – to a paradigm characterised non-physical presence and non-linearity – the hypertext.

The term “hypertext” was coined by Theodore Nelson, in 1965, when he planned the Project *Xanadu*, whose main purpose was to create a hypertext that could store all world literature so that anyone could access it from any computer. And according to most sources, the first hyperfiction – a literary text written to be read in a computer – was created by Michael Joyce, in 1987, and it was entitled *Afternoon: A Story*.

Comparing the hypertext to the linear model of the printed text, the former has no predefined beginning, middle or end, it has a very flexible sequence and it can be described as a “non-sequential writing-text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of chunks connected by links which

offer the reader different pathways" (Theodore Nelson, qtd. in Vaz 33). About thirty years later, Marie-Laure Ryan, in *Cyberspace Textuality*, defined hypertext as a

[t]ext broken into fragments ("lexias", "textrons") and stored in a network whose nodes are connected by electronic links. A fragment typically contains a number of different links, offering the reader a choice of directions to follow. By letting readers determine their own paths of navigation through the database, hypertext promotes what is customarily regarded as a non-linear mode of reading. (6-7)

In conclusion, the hyperfiction is:

- i) non sequential;
- ii) non hierarchical;
- iii) multilinear;
- iv) heterogeneous;
- v) the centre of the narrative is not fixed;
- vi) and there are multiple connections (Levy 32).

Like it has happened for all paradigm changes, there has been some resistance and suspicion to reading literary works on a computer screen. But the truth is that the practices of reading have already changed and the hyperfiction reader is already here and we must not stop or avoid his/her inevitable growth and progression. According to Molly A. Travis,

within the next few decades, cybernetic reading will gradually displace the linear, close(d), solitary reading constructed by print text, and it would indeed seem that the process is already underway. The ideal reader for hypertext has been/is being constructed through sustained exposure to intertextualities and virtualities of mass media and information technologies. This is a reader whose experience includes exposure to . . . ever more extraordinary visual images and effects, information as sound bites, Nintendo and Sega game systems, computer video games and interactive fantasy-adventure games in a computer network. This is also a reader who has

become immersed in informatics in diverse forms such as banking, education . . . telecommunications and mass media. (116)

Reading a printed text and reading a hyperfiction requires different literacy practices and different uses of the reading literacy for it is not the same thing to read a printed text and to read a hypertext. As mentioned above, in a hypertext, the pathways are not linear as they are in a printed text. That means the reader can choose to move in any direction that the several links suggest. It also means that the reader can become a creator of its own text, more so than when reading a printed text. Hyperfiction offers virtual immediacy, intricate movement, a rich web of text in several media (video, audio) and interactivity for the reader in the form of playing the role of text producer. According to Jay David Bolter, “[p]rinting tended to magnify the distance between the author and the reader, as the author became a monumental figure, the reader only a visitor in the author’s cathedral” (3), while hyperfiction stimulates a more active role from the reader.

More recently, another author, Jon Moss, has compared the reading of a hyperfiction to playing three dimensional chess: “one move through a hyperlink can completely redirect our attention, and even if we do choose to return [to previous links] it may be with an entirely new perspective on them. This experience modifies our understanding of what reading is” (15).

The absence of sequentiality as one of the six main features of a hyperfiction, that is, the fragmentation and the absence of a beginning, a middle and an end, is not completely new; we could find it already in oral literature: “In traditional oral literature the singers organize and link story fragments into a permanently movable whole that has neither a beginning nor an ending in the classical sense, and the text itself is subject to perpetual changes” (Mihajlovic n. pag.). However, apart from few examples of non-sequentiality, information has always been organised in a sequential way, even if that sequentiality is occasionally broken by footnotes or bibliographic references (Cuadrado 249). In fact, linearity is a common cultural feature as far as reading is concerned, in other words, the printed texts define the path that the reader should follow. This characteristic of the hyperfiction may be strange to the reader, who might feel

something similar as to walking in a maze. But there is a way out of the maze if the reader lets his or her imagination build the links between the fragments that make up the hyperfiction.

But, after all, what are the benefits of bringing hyperfictions to an English language class? Apart from all those important reasons that were mentioned above concerning the printed literary text, hyperfiction will for sure stimulate even further students' reading habits because they will be reading on a computer – a very familiar and appealing medium to the younger generations who are an increasingly hypermedia-oriented readership.

Besides, reading literature online at home, for example, can free the instructor to spend class time on higher level discussions related to the material.

In addition to that, reading hyperfictions is a way of presenting a new genre to the students. As Brumfit suggests, "if the course is truly concerned with developing reading capacities, it cannot be restricted to short stories and poems which can be studied in class. All . . . types of literature should be available" (190).

Reading hyperfiction will trigger new uses of literacy. As Peter Hanon says, the nature of literacy changes as a result of technological changes: "The history of literacy is also the history of writing technology" (21).

Furthermore, a multimedia application allows students to read at their own pace and if they come across at any time of their reading with an unfamiliar word or topic they can open other sites (dictionaries and/or encyclopaedias online) and get textual explanations of what they did not understand or knew.

Due to the characteristics of hyperfiction – non-sequentiality, no fixed beginning, middle or end of the plot and the existence of multiple connections – reading literature online is an exciting and stimulating interactive format, and it will stimulate students' imagination and ability to make meaning as much or even more as printed literature. Because it is up to the reader to create the story as he moves through the several fragments of text revealed by the links. That is why George Landow calls this reader a *wreader*, because he reads and writes the story at the same time (9, 14). In fact, information technology plays an important role in developing reading skills, because reading online makes students feel as if they are producers of a text and meaning can be viewed as something which is subject to the composer of the text.

So, instead of agreeing with some trends of opinion that do not favour reading online, I believe that reading online will, in some cases, potentially improve proficiency and comprehension.

And I also believe that good literary literacy skills may determine their success at University.

To sum up, we may conclude that all literary reading requires performance and that performance should be varied and fed with different stimulus and no doubt reading literary texts online can be an attractive one for the students, young and not so young.

Some people sometimes suggest that reading will not be so important in the future as a consequence of the impact of information technology. I do not agree with this idea, although I believe different skills will be demanded from students. As Caroline Daly states, “[r]eading as literacy today requires pupils to experience texts that variously represent the world through written, digitised and visual language which the reader can interpret” (110). The point is that the current view on literacy will be, necessarily, shaped by the uses we give to written language. No doubt technology, namely, information technology will shape and request new literacies and those who are teaching the youngest generations must prepare them for literacy in the future.

While this paper has a contemporary perspective, already some twenty years ago Henry Sussman stated: “Virtually every recent approach to literacy acknowledges the impact of the electronic media on the nature and acquisition of language skills and asks if we are not on the verge of a new literacy, conditioned by these very media” (208).

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