And Now For Something Not Completely Different: An Approach to Language Through Literature

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This article claims that L2 learners are often given an experience of literature which is completely different from that intended by the authors and from that which they experience in their L1. They are often asked to study texts rather than to respond to the literature in them and this often leads to a reinforcement of their tendency to read studiously in the L2 and to aim for total comprehension. This in turn can lead to an emphasis on low-level linguistic de-coding and to uni-dimensional representation of the texts they are asked to read. It is argued that what we should be doing instead is to encourage learners to establish experiential reading as their norm and sufficient comprehension as their goal and to help them to achieve a multi-dimensional representation of literature which can facilitate language acquisition, stimulate a willingness to read and develop the confidence and competence required for successful extensive reading.

After arguing the case for helping L2 readers to achieve aesthetic responses to literature the article outlines and demonstrates four approaches which can be used to ensure that reading literature is an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

INTRODUCTION

In a letter to his brother and sister, Charles L. Dodgson describes his teaching methodology (Carroll 1855). He stresses the importance of the tutor being “dignified and at a distance from the pupil” to make sure the pupil is “as much as possible degraded” and he describes a lesson in which the teacher shouts questions via a series of sub-scouts to a pupil who is sitting bewildered in the yard downstairs. Of course, communication is impeded and, for example, the teacher's question, “What is twice three?” is received by the pupil as, “What's a nice fee?”; and his timid answer of, “Half a guinea!” is passed back to the teacher as “Don't be a ninny!”. This is obviously a ludicrously exaggerated version of a teaching approach. But is it that different from what often happens in the language through literature classroom in which a dominating expert interrogates diminished learners about literature which they feel to be at a great distance from their lives? The teacher has studied the text and knows the right answers; the learners are reluctant participants in a negative quest for comprehension. The result very often is a failure to engage the learners' minds or to interest them in reading literature.

This interrogative approach to literature is encouraged by the left-brain bias of most educational institutions, which value analytical study and seek to achieve

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convergence of response. And it is reinforced by coursebooks which use literature as a means of testing the linguistic skills of the learners. For example, in Intermediate Matters, (Bell and Gower 1991:141) an interesting short story, The Great Whale’s Mistake is accompanied by the following tasks:

4 Read the whole story once quickly and try to summarise it in one sentence.
5 Look at the definitions below and match them to words from the last two paragraphs of the story.
6 Read the story more carefully and answer the following questions.

In Headway Upper Intermediate (Soars and Soars 1987: 68) an extract from Somerset Maugham’s The Lotus Eater is accompanied by the following instructions:

Comprehension check

4 Describe the setting of the meal
   What time of day is it?
   What sort of inn is it?
   What is the food and wine like?
   What is the atmosphere of the scene?

In both the examples above the learners are being restricted to a uni-dimensional representation of the text and are not being encouraged to activate the multi-dimensional representation which they do automatically when reading in the L1 (Masuhara 1997). In other words, they are being asked to respond to an L2 text linguistically when they would respond to an L1 text in linguistic, sensory and affective ways. The problem is that many textbooks and teachers are giving learners an experience of literature which is completely different from that intended by the authors and completely different from that enjoyed by readers in the L1. In fact it is not an experience of literature at all. It is an imposed study of texts. In the L1, unless we are teachers or students of literature, we do not read literature studiably, we do not normally re-read pages many times; we do not desperately search for a conscious interpretation of what the author is saying to us nor do we consciously analyse how the author is saying it. We read literature experientially with a willing investment of cognitive and affective energy. We read what we want to read and we abandon what we are not enjoying. Above all we process literature using both verbal and non-verbal codes and in responding we activate many cognitive and affective areas of the brain at the same time.

When authors are writing they are creating literature. When we give learners poems or books we are giving them texts. If we help and encourage them to respond experientially to what they read then they can create literature from the texts too. If the learners are asked to read studiably they will only read texts and will gain little more than a few words and a grade for comprehension. What we need to do is to stop interrogating our learners about their understanding of the words in the text and to start encouraging them to respond to the literature in it.

AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Let me give you an experience of literature. Just sit back and read the following poems. Don’t try to study them or to understand them. Just try to relax and to experience the poems.

Missed
Out of work
divorced
usually pissed
he aimed
low in life
and
missed.

(McGough 1991)

Stinging in the Rain
Stinging in the rain I'm
Stinging in the rain My
Skin is peeling I'm
Stinging in the rain I
Don't like the feeling I
Can't stand the pain It's
Burning my flesh And
Boiling my brain The
Buildings are melting I
Can't take the strain There's
Blood on the sidewalk I'm
Going insane I'm
Crying and crying And
Dying in vain I'm
Stinging just stinging
In the stinking acid
(What a glorious feeling) . . .

(McGough 1993)
Have a Nice Day!

“Help, help,” said a man, “I’m drowning.”
“Hang on,” said a man from the shore.
“Help, help,” said the man, “I’m not clowning.”
“Yes I know and I heard you before.
Be patient, dear man who is drowning;
You see I’ve got a disease,
I’m waiting for a Doctor I Browning,
So do be patient please
“How long,” said the man who was drowning,
“Will it take for the Doc to arrive?
“Not very long,” said the man with the disease,
Till then try staying alive.”
“Very well,” said the man who was drowning,
“I’ll try and stay afloat
By reciting the poems of Browning
And other things he wrote.
“Help, help,” said the man who had a disease.
“I suddenly feel quite ill.”
“Keep calm,” said the man who was drowning.
“Breathe deeply and lay quite still.”
“Oh dear,” said the man with the awful disease,
“I think I’m going to die.”
“Farewell,” said the man who was drowning.
Said the man with disease, “Goodbye.”
So the man who was drowning drowned
And the man with disease passed away.
But apart from that and a fire in my flat
It’s been a very nice day.

(Milligan 1987)

What did you do whilst you were reading the poems? What was going on in your mind? Think about it and then just make a few notes on a piece of paper before you read on.

This is what I did when I first experienced these poems. Did you do these things too?

1 I verbalised
I repeated the words silently in my head in my own voice or in the voice of the writer and I talked to myself about the poems (e.g. “Reminds me of friends who aimed low in life and missed.”). It seems that, despite what many books on the teaching of reading say, it is not possible for written text to be processed directly into meaning without first being translated into the acoustic code. It also seems that this process not only allows us to retain the words longer but that the intonation, emphasis, pauses etc., of our internal reading begin the process of comprehending the text which is carried on by our discussion with ourselves and by various other ways of representing the text mentally. (See Geschwind 1979:109; Tomlinson 1997: 148)

2 I visualised.
I saw pictures in my mind. Some of them represented the poems to me and some of them connected the poems to experiences in my own life. For example, whilst and just after reading Singing in the Rain, I saw the cinema in which I watched the film Singing in the Rain as a boy in Blackpool in the fifties plus an image of a soldier lying in the gutter screaming from pain on the street created for the film of Singing in the Rain. It seems that at least 90% of L1 readers visualise when reading literature and that this mental process plays a crucial role in personalising the text, in giving it salience and coherence and in helping to create a representation of the text for processing, storage and subsequent retrieval. (See Sadoski and Paivio 1994; Tomlinson 1996a, 1997, 1998)

3 I connected
I connected the words to other sections of the text, to other works of art, to what I know about the writers and above all to my own experience of life. So, for example, I made the connection between Singing in the Rain, the film Singing in the Rain and the way many Hollywood films simplify and glorify. I also made the connections between Have a Nice Day, the “silly” voice and zany smile which Spike Milligan uses when reciting poetry on stage and the annoying tendency of some Americans to say, “Have a nice day.” regardless of the time of day or the circumstances. These connections were made mentally without any conscious effort. They involved mental interaction between verbal and sensory codes and interaction between concept driven data in my mind and text driven data extracted from the poems. (See Sadoski and Paivio 1994; Tomlinson 1997: 120-21,149)

4 I made inferences
I filled in the gaps left by the writer by working out what I thought was inferred but not stated by the writer (e.g. that the man was screaming in the rain in Vietnam). Again I did this sub-consciously and I used both verbal and visual codes (i.e. I saw visual images of events, places, people etc. not described by the writer and I talked to myself about them: (See Sadoski and Paivio 1994; Iser 1978: 137-38; Tomlinson 1997: 121-23, 152, 1998)

5 I made predictions
As I was reading the poems I subconsciously predicted what was coming in the poem (e.g. that the two men in Have a Nice Day would die). Some of the predictions
were made visually (e.g. I saw the drowning man drown) and some of them were made verbally. (See Tomlinson 1997: 124, 153-54, 1998)

6 I tolerated ambiguity
At times I was not quite sure what something meant but I carried on reading assuming that it would become clearer either through connections being made in my mind or as a result of further information in the text. (See Tomlinson 1997: 123-124,154)

7 I responded emotionally
As I was reading the poems I was processing them affectively as well as cognitively (e.g. I felt angry at the folly of cruel war; I felt pity and anger because the man aimed low and missed). It seems that emotion is a powerful determinant of what we pay attention to when reading, of what is taken into the working memory, of what achieves deep processing and of what is retained in the long term memory. (See Rogers 1983; Sadoski and Paivio 1994; Temple 1993: 185-213; Tomlinson 1997: 124-27, 1998)

8 I activated many areas of both the left and right hemispheres of my brain
I did not just use one location in the brain to process the poems. In retrospect I was actually aware of my responses buzzing around in my brain from area to area. It seems that I probably used areas in my left hemisphere for processing the syntax and the semantics of the text but that I also activated different areas in my right hemisphere which are used for visualisation, for inferencing and for emotive responses. I took multiple routes towards a processing of the text whereas in answering coursebook comprehension questions I might have been restricted to one route only. I activated many connections in my brain and therefore achieved holistic as well as discrete processing of my representations of the poems, whereas in answering comprehension questions on the poems I might not have fired these multiple connections and might have only managed discrete and shallow responses to the poems. (See Masuhara 1997; Temple 1993: 151-184)

9 I processed the poems dynamically
My interpretation of the poems was not fixed. It changed and developed whilst and after reading them as a result of the many connections being made in my mind. Any answer I might have given to a comprehension question on the poems would have been a static misrepresentation of the interpretation which was still developing in my mind. (See Masuhara 1997)

10 Above I responded aesthetically
Rosenblatt defines an aesthetic response as a “lived through experience” (1994: 1067). In other words the reader takes part in the experience, the reader affects the experience and is affected by it. Every person’s aesthetic response to the same work of literature shares something in common with everybody else’s but it is crucially different too. Rosenblatt in her transactional theory of reading (1994)

And Now For Something Not Completely Different:

1 To encourage experiential reading of literature which can help to create many of the conditions found to facilitate language acquisition.

e.g.
- a rich and comprehensible exposure to language in use;
- input which is meaningful to the individual learner;
- a focus on meaning rather than on form;
- relaxed and motivated experience of the language in use;
- a willing investment of energy and attention;
- a full engagement of the mind and especially of the affective areas of the mind (a factor which research in neuroscience is demonstrating to be crucial to effective and durable learning – see, for example, Jacobs and Schumann 1992).
2 To discourage studiol reading of literature (as encouraged by many textbooks and examinations) which leads for many learners to a continuation of the beginners' model of reading which encourages conscious concentration on low level processing of language in order to achieve complete comprehension of the text. Such an approach to reading cuts the learner off from sub-conscious resources such as visualisation, connecting and inferencing and prevents the neural connections being made which would both enrich the experience and facilitate global and dynamic processing of the text. It also often leads to reading frustration and failure and an unwillingness to read outside or after the course.

3 To encourage extensive reading, which is for most learners the most available and effective means of learning the target language during, outside and after the course (Elley 1991; Krashen 1993, Tomlinson 1997: 301-303). Positive experiences of reading literature in the L2 on a course can encourage free reading outside and after the course and thus increase opportunities for continued learning of the language. If you read forever you can continue to learn for ever.

HOW CAN WE HELP LEARNERS TO READ LITERATURE EXPERIENCYALLY?

There are many ways (Tomlinson 1996b, 1997: 288-312) but I will focus on four.

1 Delay Reading
Beginners cannot read experientially in an L2 because they do not have enough language to achieve the automatic decoding of words vital to release the processing energy and to fire the neural connections required by such high level experiential skills as visualisation, connecting, inferencing etc. If beginners are asked to read they study each word and they process the text rather than their mental representation of it.

Therefore we should delay reading until the learners have achieved a linguistic threshold level and then start by encouraging experiential rather than studiol approaches to reading. But before that we should give the learners experience of literature through dramatic readings (i.e. reading a story or poem aloud with visual aids, sound effects, gestures etc.) and through Total Physical Response Plus (Tomlinson 1994b) (e.g. the learners mime a story all together as the teacher tells it to them).

2 Provide Task Free Experience of Literature
a) We could read literature aloud at the beginning of a lesson and then give the learners the text to take away to read at the end of the lesson if they want to. The texts could be jokes, anecdotes, advertisements, poems, short stories or extracts from novels or plays.

b) We should encourage extensive reading willingly undertaken by, for example, providing a class library and encouraging learners to use institution and public libraries. One effective way of building a class library is for the teacher to stagger into class carrying a large and "heavy" cardboard box and then to announce to the intrigued students that it is the new class library. The students are invited to come to the table to look at the library and they inevitably become annoyed when they discover the box is empty. The teacher then explains that there is no money available for books but that they could build their own library if for homework each student looked for an interesting text in English and then brought it to class and put it in the box. I have encouraged teachers to try this approach in Indonesia and Japan and in a number of cases the class collected over a hundred texts in three weeks and then for homework each week selected a text and took it home to read. The students collected the texts by looking for English names in telephone books and then ringing to ask if there were any old books to spare, by going to Embassies, travel agents and shops and by raising donations so that they could buy books from the bookstore. In some cases the Principal is so impressed by this self-sufficiency that money is provided to expand the library.

We should not impose tasks on students when they are reading extensively as tasks can disrupt experiential reading and encourage word-focused study of the text. However, sampling activities can be useful (e.g. reading the first page of three books and then deciding which book to read), getting students who are reading the same book to sit together can sometimes encourage spontaneous discussion of their experience of reading the book and getting students to write their name in the book when they have read it constitutes a little "club" of readers who could discuss the book if they want to. Speaking books can also help to encourage experiential reading, especially if they are used to get students into a book before letting them read on at their own pace.

3 Focus on Intake Response and Development Response Tasks
An intake response task involves the learners expressing their aesthetic responses to their experience of a text. They focus on what they have taken in from their interaction with the text not on what the they think the writer has put into the text. Such tasks can involve the learners articulating their feelings towards a character or towards an issue in the text, talking about a similar experience in their own life, drawing pictures of what they saw whilst reading the text or acting out what they think happened in the text. Such tasks do not require the learners to go back and study the text, they do not test them on their comprehension of the text and they do not have any right answers. Instead they encourage the learners to respond to what
they can understand and to read texts in experiential rather than studial ways. This is true also of development response tasks which encourage the learners to use their understanding of the text as a basis for language production. Such tasks could include continuing a story, writing a letter or diary as one of the characters, developing a local version of a story, interviewing the characters in a story, changing a story into a poem etc. For example, I asked a class to listen to a poem spoken by an old lady (Arden and D’Arcy in Tomlinson 1994) and to try to see the old lady as they listened to her. Then I asked them if they liked the old lady (an intake response task) and a lively debate broke out between those who thought she was selfish because she wanted to live with love but not to love and those who thought that she deserved to be looked after in her old age. Then I gave the students a choice between various development tasks – e.g. painting a picture of the poem, writing the old lady’s diary for that week, writing a letter from the old lady to her son in Australia or writing a dialogue between the old lady and an old man she meets in the park. No comprehension questions, no language work; just opportunities to respond to the experience of listening to and reading the poem. Another example of an intake response task would be the drawing activities I gave to a class in connection with the poem First Day at School (McGough 1979). After talking to each other about their own first day at school they were asked to listen to me reading the poem aloud and to try to picture what is happening in their minds. Then they were asked to draw individually what they could remember seeing whilst they were listening. They then formed groups and compared pictures before drawing a composite group picture of the poem. The groups were then given copies of the poem and they were asked to develop their group picture into a detailed representation of the poem. These drawing activities occupied a ninety minute period and helped the students to articulate and develop their own individual and collective interpretations of the poem. Of course, it was not the pictures that mattered but the mental visualisation of the poem which the drawing activities encouraged. Nobody got any questions wrong and the students were rewarded for what they could understand rather than tested on what they could not understand. After the group drawings had been compared and discussed each group wrote and then performed a dialogue between the little boy and his mother when she came to collect him from school. For most of the students this lesson was a very positive experience of literature (see Tomlinson 1996 for a fuller account of this lesson).

At higher levels I sometimes add input response tasks and learning response tasks afterwards (i.e. tasks which require learners to go back to the text and to study it in order to increase their understanding of what the writer has to say and to develop their awareness of how the language is used to achieve effect). But these analytic tasks are only done after the learners have responded to their personal experience and representation of the text.

4 Use Process Approaches

Process approaches are those which involve the learners in the actual process of creating (and therefore experiencing) the text. For example, I dictated Hair Today, No Hair Tomorrow by Brian Patten at normal reading speed. After about every ten lines I stopped and encouraged the students in pairs to compare their versions, to talk about what they thought had happened and was going to happen and then to write together the next two lines of the poem. When we got to the end they wrote the last four lines of the poem and then read their lines to other pairs. After reading the end of the poem to the students I gave them the poem to read. Then in groups they wrote a letter either from the man or from the woman telling a friend what happened.

Another example of a process approach is a lesson in which I read aloud the Liverpool story Sentence of Death (Morgan in Tomlinson 1994). Every so often I stopped and invited the class to shout out as many predictions of the next word as they could think of. When we got near to the end of this highly predictable and amusing story I stopped and asked the class in groups to write their own ending of the story. After they had read their endings to each other I gave out copies of the story and asked them to write a version of the story set in their own town.

My favourite lesson involving a process approach was one based on two of Roald Dahl’s Revolting Rhymes (Dahl 1984). The lesson proceeded as follows:

1 Teacher told students to write the title of a famous story after watching his mime version of the title.
2 T told S to tell each other in groups their versions of the story of Little Red Riding Hood.
3 T led plenary re-telling of the story.
4 T told S he was going to read Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf and that they should listen and try to see pictures in their minds of the story. He told them he would stop before the end and that they should then in groups draw a picture of their version of the ending.
5 T read aloud three quarters of the story and the S drew group pictures of their endings.
6 Groups compared and discussed their drawings.
7 T read the ending of the story.
8 T led plenary telling of the story of The Three Little Pigs.
9 T read aloud two thirds of the story whilst S in large groups acted it out (e.g. six students together played the part of the first little pig).
10 T stopped reading and told S in groups to develop a mime version of their predicted ending.
11 Each group mimed their ending to another group who narrated the mime for them (e.g. Group 1 mimed to Group 2 and vice-versa).
12 S read the two stories individually.
13 S in groups wrote their story of Little Red Riding Hood in ——— (i.e. their town).
Notice that in all three examples of a process approach the students do not actually read the literature until they have experienced it in another form. Notice also the importance of personalisation and localisation in the activities and the way that the lesson aims at divergence of aesthetic response rather than convergence of efferent response.

CONCLUSION
There are many ways of helping learners to experience rather than study literature and thus to read literature in a foreign language in ways which are not completely different from the way they read literature in their L1. How about developing some ways of your own and trying them out to see if you can stimulate your learners to develop a positive attitude to literature and maybe to want to read forever.

REFERENCES
Carroll, L. (1855,) Letters to his Child-Friends.
(This article is based on a write-up of a presentation I gave at the IATEFL Symposium in Dillingen, Germany on September 21st, 1997)