# Review of Approaches to Literary Analysis and its Relevance to English Teaching

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Because the field of literary analysis of fiction, drama, and poetry has a long history, many theories exist on how to evaluate and teach literature. Six frequently discussed approaches to literary analysis include: (1) New Criticism, (2) Structuralism, (3) Stylistics,(4) Reader-Response, (5) Language-Based, and (6) Critical Literacy. The sections that follow will briefly introduce these six approaches and discuss the benefits and drawbacks they offer for teaching literature in the EFL classroom.

## APPROACH 1: NEW CRITICISM

The New Criticism approach to literary analysis appeared in the United States after World War I. According to this theory, meaning is contained solely within the literary text, apart from the effect on the reader or the author's intention, and external elements are disregarded when analyzing the work. The reader's role is to discover the one correct meaning by a close reading and analysis of formal elements such as rhyme, meter, imagery, and theme. According to Thomson (1992), the world of a literary work is self-contained, and readers must exercise total objectivity in interpreting the text. In other words, the social, historical, and political background of the text, as well as the reader's reactions or knowledge of the author's intention, distract from and are not relevant to the interpretation of the literary work.

## DISCUSSION OF THE NEW CRITICISM APPROACH

The major drawback of New Criticism is that most class activities are dedicated to identifying formal elements and literary devices such as symbolism, metaphors, similes, and irony. This turns the study of literary terms into an end in itself rather than a means to discover the beauty and value of a literary work. This excludes looking at the connection between the text and the reader's experiences and the historical and sociolinguistic influences that become apparent during the reading process (Thomson 1992).

Some who criticize the approach feel that readers inevitably relate to aspects of what they are reading and become subjectively involved with the text. In fact, this is why many teach- ers choose particular texts and communicative teaching methods: to treat reading as a process that requires introducing content; describing the setting, characters, and plot; relating the text to students' experience; and eliciting student opinion and discussion. This can, of course, include the study of literary terms, but it does not make that technique an end in itself but rather a means to discover the beauty and value of a literary work.

The feedback I received from my teacher colleagues about this approach included the following responses:

- "Different people have different responses; for example, you cannot force me to respond like you, and vice versa."

- "Literature concerns the soul. Each per- son has a distinctive soul that cannot be totally identical."

These teachers also felt that without a subjective response to the meaning of the text, and with the heavy dependence on the teacher to decipher the literary work, students will not progress in building their language skills. Therefore, the application of the New Criticism approach offers students little enjoyment or recognition of the value of literature, and perhaps worse, creates a negative attitude towards literature.

## THE SELECTION OF LITERARY TEXTS

One criticism of using literature in the EFL classroom deals with the overuse of what is called the *traditional canon* those famous, classic, award-winning literary works that often contain language that is difficult for a learner of English to comprehend. As one of my colleagues noted, "It is very hard to criticize and understand the deeper meanings of those famous works that have won many prizes." This issue especially relates to New Criticism, which typically deals with texts that exemplify the highest literary values. Because this single-minded focus neglects

the readers' experience, there is little reason to select texts that are suitable to the learners' needs or language proficiency. Although not all literary classics are too difficult for EFL classes, the point for teachers is that they should consider literature that students can access and relate to.

In choosing acceptable texts for the EFL context, there are several things to consider. First is the difficulty of the vocabulary and syntax, and teachers should look for works that match the level they are teaching. Other things that make literature difficult are the historical, social,and political references that add complexity for non-English speakers.The students' cultural unfamiliarity with texts causes problems and makes the students dependent on the teacher's interpretation. As a result, students often have to study literature by listening to the teacher's translation and writing down aspects of the analysis. The teacher, who speaks mostly in the students' native language, monopolizes a large part of the classroom time, which is an unproductive way to learn English.

The combination of difficult language and cultural material creates passive students and negatively affects their motivation due to the lack of enjoyment or benefit from the experience. An American teacher with experience in teaching literature in Vietnam correctly summarized the type of texts used with the New Criticism approach: "They are too long, too linguistically difficult, too culturally or his topically unfamiliar, and have few or no points of connection with students' lives."

## APPROACH 2: STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism is an approach that gained importance in the 1950s; instead of interpreting a literary text as an individual entity, this approach determines where a literary text fits into a system of frameworks that can be applied to all literature (Dias and Hayhoe 1988). Like New Criticism, Structuralism emphasizes total objectivity in examining literary texts and denies the role of readers' personal responses in analyzing literature. It requires learners to approach literary texts scientifically and to use their knowledge of structures and themes to place the work into a meaningful hierarchical system. According to Culler (1982, 20), Structuralism does not focus on the aesthetic value of literature, but on the different processes and structures that are "involved in the production of meaning."

## DISCUSSION OF THE STRUCTURALIST APPROACH

Carter and Long (991, 183) summarize the criticism of Structuralism when they write that "instead of being concerned with how a literary text renders an author's experience of life and allows us access to human meanings, the structuralist is only interested in mechanical

formal relationship, such as the components of a narrative, and treats the literary text as if it were a scientific object." This focus on literature as a scientific system rather than as one containing individual and subjective meaning downplays the individual's role in constructing meaning. However, literature should contribute to students' personal development, enhance cultural awareness, and develop language skills. Though Structuralism does make literature more accessible than New Criticism by connecting a work to an overall thematic structure, it over-emphasizes the linguistic systems and codes as "the sole determinants of meaning" (Thomson 1992,15). Structuralism therefore is less relevant for the teaching of literature because the EFL teachers and learners possess inadequate skills and knowledge to approach the text scientifically, which makes the study of the process fruitless and results in a lack of motivation for reading literature.

Some of what is lacking in the Structural approach is reinforced by the reactions from my colleagues, who reflect that the intimate relationship between literature and personal development should lead to:

- An appreciation of the value of literature to their spiritual and emotional lives, an interest in exploring literary themes from different countries to compare cultural differences.

## APPROACH 3: STYLISTICS

The Stylistic approach, which emerged in the late 1970s, analyzes the features of literary language to develop students' sensitivity to literature. This includes the unconventional structure of literature, especially poetry, where language often is used in a non-grammatical and loose manner. Whether these unconventional structures confuse or enhance a learner's knowledge of the language is the subject of debate. In this respect one must consider the differences among genres. For example, poetry is often abstract and imaginative, while dialogues in dramas are often very realistic.

In the Stylistic approach, the teacher encourages students to use their linguistic knowledge to make aesthetic judgments and interpretations of the texts. Thus the issue of the role of the reader in the process comes up again. According to Rodger (1983), the language form plays the most important role in deciphering a poem's significance, while others such as Moody (1983) see the importance of the reader's background knowledge, along with close attention to language features, as important to interpreting complex texts that are "capable of analysis and commentary from a variety of different points of view" (23).

One useful model of Stylistics is Widdowson's (1983) comparative approach to teaching literature, in which

excerpts from literature are compared to excerpts from other texts, such as news reports, tourist brochures, or advertisements. This technique illustrates that the language of literature is an independent kind of discourse and teaches students different ways that language can be used. In this way students also build their knowledge of *registers* the different ways language is used in a particular setting to communicate. Students can compare the registers in a literary work with the registers of non-literary texts, which will help them recognize the differences between literary and non-literary language and the various ways language is used to accomplish things. Students will learn to appreciate the power and versatility of all types of language to express the complete range of human feelings and experiences.

## DISCUSSION OF THE STYLISTIC APPROACH

The Stylistic approach is relevant because it clarifies one of the rationales for teaching literature: to highlight the aesthetic value of literature and provide access to the meaning by exploring the language and form of the literary text with a focus on meaning. My colleagues agree that the beautiful language of poetry, drama, and fiction are motivating and attractive features.

From my teaching experiences, I find that students appreciate literature more when they can explore the beauty of literary language. For example, when my students read the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, they were very excited to discover how the form of the poem reflects the theme of the poem. They were surprised and joyful to observe that the shape of each stanza illustrates the shape of the wheelbarrow itself, the bumpy sound of each stanza replicates the sound the wheelbarrow makes on the road, and the repetition in the sound of the four stanzas also reflects the repeated sound the wheelbarrow makes on the road. In addition, the fact that there is no capital letter in the poem suggests the way people usually consider a wheelbarrow: an unimportant, humble, and almost meaningless object; but the capital letters in the title shows the opposite: how meaningful, important, and beautiful the wheelbarrow is to the worker's life in particular and to human life in general. My students found the process of exploring the language style and form of the poem both entertaining and valuable. However, they realized that this analysis was not possible without guidance from the teacher, and they felt they would lack confidence if working alone.

If the Stylistic approach to literature is the only method used in the EFL context, some problems do arise. Challenges include the difficulty of recognizing irony in the literature of a foreign culture (Ramsaran 1983) and language learners' limited communicative competence in English and lack of experience of and sensitivity to a variety of registers in everyday life contexts (Trengove 1983). These problems increase in EFL classrooms with limited language resources. In addition, the teacher must be knowledgeable about the terminology of literary devices in order to guide students. This knowledge, however, remains problematic in EFL contexts where teacher training and development in literary methods is often limited. Though it is a great pleasure for learners to simply compare the differences between literary language and non-literary language, teaching stylistics effectively requires an investment in teacher training.

## APPROACH-4 READER'S RESPONSE

The principles of the Reader-Response approach include attention to the role of the reader and a process-oriented approach to reading literature. Reader-Response supports activities that encourage students to draw on their personal experiences, opinions, and feelings in their interpretation of literature. Dias and Hayhoe (1988, 15) point out that "it is precisely the role of the reader in the act of reading that has not been sufficiently and properly addressed." Reader-Response addresses this problem by making the learners "active participant[s] in the learning process" (Davies and Stratton 1984, 3).

The crucial connection between the reader and the text is explained by Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of literary reading, which describes the *transactional relationship* between a reader and a poem. The events that take place in a literary work occur at a particular time and place, and different readers react to these events in different ways, depending on their unique interests and experiences. Each reader attaches his or her own personal interpretation to a work; thus, a poem is "an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text" and "should not be con- fused with an object in the sense of an entity existing apart from author or reader" (Rosen- blatt 1978, 20–21). This perspective emphasizes the two-way relationship between texts and readers, a perspective that has much in common with theories of *top-down* reading, where students use their *schemata* or familiarity with the topic from background knowledge and personal feelings to help them understand the work and improve their comprehension and interpretation of new information (Price and Driscoll 1997; Schwartz et al. 1998).

Because each reader has distinctive experiences and feelings, an author's idea about a work may be described in a multitude of ways. This is why Wright (1975, 17) objects to "the notion that poems can be pinned down once and for all, paraphrased, translated into some statement which is What the Poem Means, and that this statement is then all you need to understand and appreciate the poem."

## DISCUSSION OF THE READER-RESPONSE APPROACH

The Reader-Response approach makes an important contribution to learning by demystifying literature and connecting it to individual experience. Researchers and teachers in the field of ESOL support making literature more accessible by activating students' background knowledge so they can better predict and decode the language and themes of liter ray texts. The Reader-Response approach is also supported because it takes advantage of the crucial fact that emotional reactions from reading a story, poem, or play can be harnessed for classroom instruction (Bleich1975).My colleagues agree that activating students' schemata in reading literature is important and that personalizing the learning experience increases student participation and motivation. In fact, these are core principles of CLT that are known to encourage language learning through student-centered and process-oriented activities.

As one example, a colleague described a pre-reading exercise he used before his students read Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." He asked the students to think about a time when they lost or had to separate from something or somebody they liked or loved very much, and what their feelings were at that moment. When students read the poem, their pre-reading reflection allowed them to immediately understand its theme, much more so than if the teacher had skipped the reflection and simply begun the class with "Today we study 'Annabel Lee.' Turn to page 5!" After the class analyzed the poem together and conducted follow-up activities, the students teased the teacher by saying: "Ah, your love is your Annabel!" I also recognize a positive change in my students' attitudes towards literature when I connect the material with their lives. I see joy sparkling in the students' eyes, thoughtful reflection in their answers, and interest and curiosity for literature when they come to class, feeling free and relaxed.

## APPROACH 5: LANGUAGE-BASED

Like the Stylistic approach, the Language- Based approach emphasizes awareness of the language of literature, and it is a basic stage for EFL learners. However, this approach facilitates students' responses and experience with literature, and it is considered more accessible for language learners than the Stylistic approach (Nash 1986; Littlewoods 1986; Carter and Long 1991). In addition, the Language-Based approach calls for a variety of language instruction activities, including brainstorming to activate background knowledge and make predictions, rewriting the ends of stories or summarizing plots, cloze procedures to build vocabulary and comprehension, and

jigsaw readings to allow students to collaborate with others, form opinions, and engage in spirited debates. The point is that literature is an excellent vehicle for CLT methods that result in four-skill English language development through interaction, collaboration, peer teaching, and student independence. The teacher's role is not to impose interpretation but to introduce and clarify technical terms, to prepare and offer appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene when necessary to provide prompts or stimuli.

## DISCUSSION OF THE LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACH

The Language-Based approach responds to language students' needs in studying literature: they receive the skills and techniques to facilitate access to texts and develop sensitivity to different genres so they can enjoy a piece of literature that relates to their lives. Moreover, this approach meets students' needs in learning a language: students communicate in English to improve their language competence; they develop the necessary skills of working in groups; and they become active learners while teachers support and guide them in the learning process. My colleagues agree that the Language-Based approach is motivating because it fulfills students' needs in learning about literature and language. It helps students handle a text, enhances their enjoyment and interest in literature, develops their autonomy, and improves their learning of English.

## CONCLUSION

Students' motivation in the learning process is often determined by their interest in and enthusiasm for the material used in the class, the level of their persistence with the learning tasks, and the level of their concentration and enjoyment (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). This type of involvement is something that cannot be imposed; it must come from the materials and lessons that are implemented in the classroom. I hope this article has shown how teaching literature can develop EFL students' motivation in learning English and that the ideas presented here will facilitate teachers' effective use of literature to improve English instruction.

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