

PALA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2009

The Art of Stylistics

Roosevelt Academy, Middelburg – The Netherlands

July 28-August 1

Literature in EFL Contexts: Challenges to Meet

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Part One: Abstract

The present paper aims to offer a thought-provoking idea on how literary texts: novels and short stories- can promote EFL learners' communicative competence as well as enhance their critical thinking skills.

With the ultimate goal of emphasising quality education in mind, the paper adopts the idea that literature plays an essential role in EFL contexts. Generally speaking, there are three main merits for a literary education programme; namely, developing learners' scope of literary understanding and critical judgment for aesthetic purposes, presenting a broad spectrum of the ideals as expressed in the world's great works, and improving all aspects of the comprehension process: affective consideration; readiness consideration; etc. Providing learners with *literature experiences* is, therefore, central to effective instruction.

Adopting this view, the paper seeks some convincing answers to the following questions:

- How can EFL practitioners maximise the effectiveness of utilising literary texts: novels and short stories, to promote students' communicative competence as well as enhance their critical thinking skills?
- How can EFL practitioners maximise the effectiveness of utilising literary texts: novels and short stories, through utilising a stylistics approach?

The paper presents a short story written by Thomas Wolfe: *The Far and the Near*, followed by the presenter's proposed procedure for dealing with novels and short stories in EFL contexts. As far as the presenter's recommended methodology is concerned, an *eclectic methodology* should be employed.

Linking the paper to the theme of the Conference, the last part portrays literary texts-novels and short stories- in EFL contexts: challenges to meet; demands to satisfy; requirements to fulfil.

Part Two: Novels and Short Stories in EFL Contexts – Theories and Approaches

What theories and approaches can be adopted to ensure quality education in the world of EFL literature? This part presents a number of related approaches and theories within the field of literature.

The role of *emotion* in education has taken on more and more importance in the field. A number of specialists state that, understanding and managing our emotions has impacted the educational sphere (Dawson, 2007; Brearely 2000). Stressing the significant role *emotion* plays, Dawson (2007) introduces a reading theory for the teaching of World Englishes literature. The proposed reading theory emphasizes the universality of human emotion, and is based on affective responses to literary works. According to the researcher, happiness; fear; anger; and sadness are what make up the embodiment of a universality of human emotion, and therefore, should be viewed as the main vehicle for engagement with a literary piece. The theory is referred to as *emotion tracking pedagogy*, and has been initiated as an approach for the teaching of World Englishes literature. The role that emotion plays in reading is significant; it is the primary resource a reader holds to make text mean. While decoding a text at various levels, a reader strives for the text to mean. Affect plays a primary role in this meaning construction. When discussing the role of affect, attention should be given to the importance of response; affective response in particular.

A number of specialists recommend the use of a *stylistics approach* when dealing with a literary piece. Stockwell (2007); for example, mentions that due to its capacity for teaching English in EFL contexts in an engaging way, literary stylistics has achieved success throughout the world. Placing “lexico-grammatical” principles in the context of patterns of meaning as in authentic texts has allowed instructors to engage learners with formal grammar in discourse, whilst maintaining the students’ interest. The accessibility of an enabling method to allow learners quickly to engage in analysis is the main reason for the success of stylistics.

Cook (2003) as well, explains that *literary stylistics* has proved to be effective in EFL/ESL contexts; it links linguistic choices to their effects upon the reader, as well as raises awareness not only of the importance of exact wording, but also of how there is far more at stake in the use of

language than the literal meaning of the words. Stylistic analyses tend to highlight three related aspects of literary language; namely, its patterning of linguistic units to create rhymes; rhythms; and parallel constructions, its frequent deviation from the norms of more everyday language use, and the way in which the form of the words seems to intensify the meaning.

According to Crawshaw (1996), the study of *stylistics* is an integrated discipline that brings together the complementary domains of linguistics, psychology, and sociology. Any utterance or text, fictional or otherwise, takes place or is created by a speaker/author in a given context, and is articulated in a particular form to represent an intention or view of the world. The form of the message is a product both of context and of intention, just as intention can be understood only as a function of context and form.

Sensitivity to literature, Short (1983) explains, can be taught by providing the student with a descriptive tool applicable to any literary passage, by means of which he can assess the deviance and richness of the text against the norms of everyday language. This is valuable to the foreign learner in particular because it enhances his appreciation by reinforcing knowledge of the regularities he will meet in non-literary language. Instead of leaping into interpretation and then evaluation, students should be urged to devote more time to explicit description, over which they are more likely to agree. Hence, *stylistic analysis* should be central to the teaching of literature, since it is only by demonstrating the explicit link between linguistic structures and meaning/effect that we will understand how literature works.

With the advent of *creative reading approach*, Carter and McRae (1999) and Carter and McCarthy (1994), and the heightened importance of *reader-response theory*, two major principles have been stressed; namely, process and activity. According to the process-based principle, the reader is involved in the reading of literature in the form of a process. It is argued that the reader is more likely to appreciate the literary text as he/she is experiencing it directly as a process. The activity-based principle, on the other hand, signifies the reader's active role in approaching the literary text. Traditional teacher-led literature interpretation classes have no role to play in this respect. Besides the researchers mentioned above, both Giroux and McLaren (1994) believe that the *reader-response* approach has initiated a decentralization of the literature classroom as the reader is considered the potential knower. Techniques employed in reader-response, it is argued, help

the reader realize his /her active role as a reader, thus becoming more involved.

Close (1992) is of the opinion that literature can be understood in different ways. Adopting a *critical approach*; therefore, would move students away from searching for the all-important right answer. Getting students to stretch their minds helps them discard the notion that only teachers have the right answer, and that they are too inexperienced or dumb to know the answer.

El-Sherify (1987) discusses a number of approaches which can be adopted whilst teaching/learning foreign literature. These are:

- The analytic approach: This approach places little focus on information about the work of literature. It is concerned with analyzing and interpreting the text. In this approach, lecturing is rarely used.
- The experiential approach: Through this approach, the student is exposed to as many literary experiences as possible. Both the form and the content are essential. The students are invited to connect the theme in the work of literature to their personal experiences.
- The eclectic approach: No one established approach is used here. The adoption of any approach/approaches depends on the teaching context itself.
- The translation approach: This approach employs many different techniques; namely, using one version of the same text (an English version and the L1 version), using L1 for commentary and critical notes while reading the text only in English, and using one edition in which the English version as well as the L1 version are included.
- The cultural approach: According to this approach, literature is treated as a cultural subject. It usually presents literature courses chronologically.
- The communicative-competence approach: According to this approach, students practice the four language skills while working on a piece of literature, so that in the long-run, they will acquire adequate communicative competence.
- The skills-based approach: This approach connects literature to reading. It seeks to develop reading skills through the presentation of literary works.
- The explication de text approach: This approach is similar to the analytic approach; it dissects the structure of the text.
- The semantic approach: In the semantic approach, students are after the meaning in the literary text. Because it is literary, the text usually says something when it is about something else. This double meaning is conveyed through figures of speech.

- The integrative approach: This approach assumes that it can achieve three objectives: mastery of language learning, understanding the target culture, and increasing literary understanding and appreciation. Literature is utilized to develop all language skills.
- The stylistic approach: This approach focuses on observing, classifying and characterizing the style manipulated in a literary work.
 - The integrated approach: This approach includes two components which can significantly affect learning: an extrinsic component and an intrinsic component. The extrinsic component consists of external factors such as biographical studies, while the intrinsic component consists of internal factors such as grammatical analysis.

Hawthorn (1986) as well, describes a number of approaches which can be of use when dealing with fiction. These are:

- Textual approaches: Textual approaches refer to those critical discussions which restrict themselves to information gained from the actual texts of stories; concentrating on the actual words of the stories being studied rather than bringing what is called extrinsic information.
- Generic approaches: Generic approaches emphasize that we cannot begin to read or understand a story until we are clear as to what sort of story it is.
- Biographical approaches: Upon reading a story that we really like, our natural tendency would usually be to look for other works by the same author. Such an interest in an author may encourage us to know more about him/her, and then to use any insights gained to shed fresh illumination on the writer's work.
- Psychological approaches: A psychological approach concerns itself with analyzing characters in a story, or analyzing the reader in the light of his responses to it. A literary character is thus treated as if he or she were a real person.
- Reader-oriented approaches: The reading of a story is a process. To treat a story as an object may obscure the fact that we experience a story as a set of responses over time. Critics talk of different conceptualizations of the reader: the implied reader, the original reader, and the empirical reader. The implied reader is the one suggested by the text itself, most obviously when a narrator addresses comments directly to a reader. The original reader is obviously a sort of fictive construct. It involves an attempt to understand the story in its historical context by asking what a sensitive, well-informed and intelligent reader would have made of the story when it was first published. The empirical reader entails that we, as readers, approach the text from different backgrounds.

- Feminist approaches: According to these approaches, women are typically portrayed in relation to men, and as such, are often seen in certain stereotyped ways-as passive, hysterical, emotional, etc.

Part Three: Part Three: Proposed Principles of Selecting Novels and Short Stories for EFL Teaching Contexts

Reading for pleasure, motivation increase, and the enhancement of learning fun are amongst the principal requirements to be met when dealing with novels and short stories in EFL contexts. To meet such requirements; therefore, the overriding question in selecting a short story/novel is, how this short story/novel can improve the learning process and increase its effectiveness.

The presenter proposes a number of criteria which can be considered when selecting a novel/short story for teaching in an EFL context. These are:

- Language complexity. A text has to be of the *right* language- complexity level, that is to say, it should be neither too difficult nor too easy, or else, it will be either too challenging or too simple to deal with. Language complexity, the presenter believes, can be measured in terms of the vocabulary; grammar; and structure used in a text, considering the extent to which such language elements are frequent/infrequent; standard/colloquial; familiar/unfamiliar; and modern/archaic. Normally, the more frequent; modern; familiar as well as standard a piece of language is, the easier for an EFL learner to deal with.
- Cultural appropriateness. Opening the door for EFL students to the foreign culture, a literary text can be used to enrich cultural awareness (Hall: 2007, Chen: 2006, and Reese: 2002). To maximise the effectiveness of using literary texts in this regard-the presenter thinks- a text has to be appropriate in terms of cultural content; it should not be culturally offensive. Furthermore, “cultural allusion” where unfamiliar cultural content can be one of the contributing factors which leads to learners’ failure in understanding a literary text, has to be avoided (see Baba: 2008).
- Length. A text has to be practical in terms of length; it should not be too long a text, or else, it may be time-consuming in contexts where the time factor is really crucial.
- Variety. Variety in terms of theme, setting, and style exposes students to different experiences, and as such, is expected to be of use and interest.

- Relative contemporary. Considering EFL contexts where learners are mainly interested to learn English for communication purposes, language familiarity has a role to play. Part of what makes language familiar is the era during which it is used. Old English, in such a situation, may not be of genuine support.
- Authenticity. A text has to be authentic rather than simplified, to expose learners to language used for genuine purposes.
- Age group. A text has to suit the target group, in terms of both theme and content. An eighteen-year old learner, for example, is unlikely to be interested in reading a text dealing with early childhood concerns.

Part Four: Novels and Short Stories in EFL Contexts – Proposed Procedure

Part four presents a short story by Thomas Wolfe, along with a proposed procedure, which the presenter thinks can be of use and interest when dealing with short stories/novels in an EFL context.

The Far and the Near by Thomas Wolfe

1. On the outskirts of a little town upon a rise of land that swept back from the railway there was a tidy little cottage of white boards, trimmed vividly with green blinds. To one side of the house there was a garden neatly patterned with plots of growing vegetables, and an arbor for the grapes, which ripened later in August. Before the house there were three mighty oaks, which sheltered it in their clean and massive shade in summer, and to the other side there was a border of gay flowers. The whole place had an air of tidiness, thrift, and modest comfort.

2. Every day, a few minutes after two o'clock in the afternoon, the limited express between two cities passed this spot. At that moment the great train, having halted for a breathing space at the town near by, was beginning to lengthen evenly into its stroke, but it had not yet reached the full drive of its terrific speed. It swung into view deliberately, swept past with a powerful swaying motion of the engine, a low smooth rumble of its heavy cars upon pressed steel, and then it vanished in the cut. For a moment the progress of the engine could be marked by heavy bellowing puffs of smoke that burst at spaced intervals above the edges of the meadow grass, and finally nothing could be heard but the solid clacking tempo of the wheels receding into the drowsy stillness of the afternoon.

3. Every day for more than twenty years, as the train had approached this house, the engineer had blown on the whistle, and every day, as soon as she heard this signal, a woman had appeared on the porch of the little house and waved to him. At first she had a small child clinging to her skirts, and now this child had grown to full womanhood, and every day she, too, came with her mother to the porch and waved.

4. The engineer had grown old and gray in service. He had driven his great train, loaded with its weight of lives, across the land ten thousand times. His own children had grown up and married, and four times he had seen before

him on the tracks the ghastly dot of tragedy converging like a cannon ball to its eclipse of horror at the boiler head-a light spring wagon filled with children, with its clustered row of small stunned faces; a cheap automobile stalled upon the tracks, set with the wooden figures of people paralyzed with fear; a battered hobo walking by the rail, too deaf and old to hear the whistle's warning; and a form flung past his window with a scream-all this the man had seen and known . He had known all the grief, the joy, the peril and the labor such a man could know; he had grown seamed and weathered in his loyal service, and now, schooled by the qualities of faith and courage and humbleness that attended his labor, he had grown old, and had the grandeur and the wisdom these men have.

5. But no matter what peril or tragedy he had known, the vision of the little house and the women waving to him with a brave free motion of the arm had become fixed in the mind of the engineer as something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin, and something that would always be the same, no matter what mishap, grief or error might break the iron schedule of his days.

6. The sight of the little house and of these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever known. He had seen them in a thousand lights, a hundred weathers. He had seen them through the harsh bare light of wintry gray across the brown and frosted stubble of the earth, and he had seen them again in the green luring sorcery of April.

7. He felt for them and for the little house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel for his own children, and at length the picture of their lives was carved so sharply in his heart that he felt that he knew their lives completely to every hour and moment of the day, and he resolved that one day, when his years of service should be ended, he would go and find these people and speak at last with them whose lives had been so wrought into his own.

8. That day came. At last the engineer stepped from a train onto the station platform of the town where these two women lived. His years upon the rail had ended. He was a pensioned servant of his company, with no more work to do. The engineer walked slowly through the station and out into the streets of the town. Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before. As he walked on, his sense of bewilderment and confusion grew. Could this be the town he had passed ten thousand times? Were these

the same houses he had seen so often from the high windows of his cab? It was all as unfamiliar, as disquieting as a city in a dream, and the perplexity of his spirit increased as he went on.

9. Presently the houses thinned into the straggling outposts of the town, and the streets faded into a country road—the one on which the women lived. And the man plodded on slowly in the heat and dust. At length he stood before the house he sought. He knew at once that he had found the proper place. He saw the lordly oaks before the house, the flowerbeds, the garden and the arbor, and farther off, the glint of rails.

10. Yes, this was the house he sought, the place he had passed so many times, the destination he had longed for with such happiness. But now that he had found it, now that he was here, why did his hand falter on the gate; why had the town, the road, the earth, the very entrance to this place he loved turned unfamiliar as the landscape of some ugly dreams? Why did he now feel this sense of confusion, doubt, and hopelessness?

11. At length he entered by the gate, walked slowly up the path and in a moment more had mounted three short steps that led up to the porch, and was knocking at the door. Presently he heard steps in the hall, the door was opened, and a woman stood facing him.

12. And instantly, with a sense of bitter loss and grief, he was sorry he had come. He knew at once that the woman who stood there looking at him with a mistrustful eye was the same woman who had waved to him so many thousand times. But her face pinched and meager; the flesh sagged wearily in sallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt. All the brave freedom, the warmth and the affection that he had read into her gesture, vanished in the moment that he saw her and heard her unfriendly tongue.

13. And now his own voice sounded unreal and ghastly to him as he tried to explain his presence, to tell her who he was and the reason he had come. But he faltered on, fighting stubbornly against the horror of regret, confusion, disbelief that surged up in his spirit, drowning all his former joy and making his act of hope and tenderness seem shameful to him.

14. At length the woman invited him almost unwillingly into the house, and called her daughter in a harsh shrill voice. Then, for a brief agony of time,

the man sat in an ugly little parlor, and he tried to talk while the two women stared at him with a dull, bewildered hostility, a sullen, timorous restraint.

15. And finally, stammering a crude farewell, he departed. He walked away down the path and then along the road toward town, and suddenly he knew that he was an old man. His heart, which had been brave and confident when it looked along the familiar vista of the rails, was now sick with doubt and horror as it saw the strange and unsuspected visage of an earth which had always been within a stone's throw of him, and which he had never seen or known. And he knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire, was gone forever, could never be got back again.

Key Words

- outskirts : outer areas
- thrift : care about money
- cars : railway coaches
- tempo : rhythm
- receding : going away
- drowsy : sleepy
- ghastly : frightening
- converging : coming together
- stunned : shocked
- enduring : lasting
- grief : great sorrow
- sorcery : magic
- disquieting : disturbing

1. Warm up

A. Brainstorming

Do you think that travelling by train is enjoyable? Give reasons.

B. Advance Organiser

In what ways is the near different from the far?

2. Reading in Action

A. As you read find out...

- i. who the word engineer refers to in American English.
- ii. how the engineer felt when he met the two women.

B. Keeping Track

- i. The engineer's work was sometimes full of danger. Give examples.
- ii. "The sight of the little house and of these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever known". Give justifications.
- iii. According to the story, how is the far different from the near?

C. Close Study: Focus on Narrator

- i. From whose point of view is the story told?
- ii. Imagine you are the engineer. Tell the part of the story starting from the moment you had retired until the end.

D. Reader's Response

- i. Do you think the man was foolish in paying a visit to the two women? Justify your answer.

- ii. What do you think made the two women wait to the engineer throughout 20 years?
- iii. How do you like the story? Justify your answer.
- iv. Many critics believe that Wolfe's best work is to be found in his short stories. In these, he displays acute psychological insight and a talent for vivid evocation of people and places. Do you think the story displays such talents? Explain.

E. Follow up-Library/Internet Link

Have you ever read any stories written by Wolfe? Arrange for a visit to a library or search the Internet to gather sufficient data about Wolfe's publications. Then, write up a paragraph of about 100 words mentioning what you have found.

3. Language Practice

A. Word Finder

Find the words which are similar in meaning to each of the following.

- i. Care about money (paragraph 1).
- ii. Going away (paragraph 2).
- iii. Gathered together (paragraph 4).
- iv. Looked closely (paragraph 12).
- v. Frightened (paragraph 14).
- vi. Face (paragraph 15).

B. Grammar Focus-Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns are used to join pairs of sentences together. The following sentences are taken from the story. Re-write them using appropriate

pronouns or nouns to replace the relative pronouns. Remember to make the necessary changes when required.

- i. “On the outskirts of a little town upon a rise of land that swept back from the railway...”
- ii. “Before the house there were three mighty oaks which sheltered it in their clean and massive shade in summer...”
- iii. “He would go and find these people and speak at last with them whose lives had been so wrought into his own” .
- iv. “and now, schooled by the qualities of faith and courage and humbleness that attended his labor”,

C. Literary Qualities

- i. What literary device is used in each of the following?

“and four times he had seen before him on the tracks the ghastly dot of tragedy converging like a cannon ball to its eclipse of horror at the boiler head”.

“And at length the picture of their lives was carved so sharply in his heart...”

- ii. What significance does the phrase “the green luring sorcery of April” (paragraph 6) have in the story?
- iii. Explain how the following statement is used to effectively suggest and anticipate some points.

“And the man plodded on slowly in the heat and the dust.”

4. Oral Production: Debate

Divide into two groups. Group A should support the idea that the engineer was foolish in his view of the house and its occupants, as well as in visiting them. Group B should defend the idea that the engineer was not foolish in his view of the house and its occupants, as well as in visiting them.

5. Writer's Workshop

Know your Purpose –Main Ideas/Supporting Details

The important ideas in a piece of writing are called the main ideas. Details tell us more about the main ideas.

A. Pre-Writing. The sentence below states a main idea. Discuss four details you can use to tell more about it.

There are many choices you can make to help you stay healthy.

B. Drafting. Now write a draft of about 400 words stating the main idea; and providing appropriate supporting details.

C. Proof-reading. Check for mistakes in sequence links, spelling and punctuation.

D. Publishing for your Classroom Journal. Use pins to hang your piece on a line in your classroom.

6. Self Evaluation

Use the following chart to reflect on your progress in English.

Skills I have acquired recently	Remarks

7. Building up Your Portfolio

In the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats says:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter!”

To what extent does the meaning conveyed above apply to the story “The far and the near”? Justify your answer.

Part Five: Literary Texts, Novels and Short Stories, in EFL Contexts- Challenges to Meet: Concluding Word

The present paper adopts the view that literary texts: novels and short stories, play an essential role in EFL contexts. Adopting this view, the paper seeks some convincing answers to the following questions:

- How can EFL practitioners maximise the effectiveness of utilising literary texts: novels and short stories, to promote students' communicative competence as well as enhance their critical thinking skills?
- How can EFL practitioners maximise the effectiveness of utilising literary texts: novels and short stories, through utilising a stylistics approach?

As far as the first question is concerned, the presenter proposes that the answer key lies in *exposure* and *practice*. Students should be offered sufficient exposure to EFL literature, as well as given adequate practice in language skills and elements whilst focusing on higher order thinking skills.

To sufficiently answer the second question, the presenter believes that it is through involvement that EFL learners become well-equipped with critical thinking skills as well as communicative competence. To adequately meet this requirement, three types of involvement are required: affective, cognitive, and interactive. Students need to be involved affectively, cognitively, and interactively with the novel/short story being dealt with.

Based on the aforementioned answers, the questions to raise accordingly would normally be concerned with *what* and *how*. *What types of novels and short stories* should students be exposed to as well as have practice in? Amongst the essential criteria which the presenter believes should be stressed when selecting a novel/short story for teaching purposes are: language complexity, cultural appropriateness, variety, length, authenticity, relative contemporary, and age group (see Part Four for details). Concerned with the question *how*; that is to say, *methodology*, it is the presenter's belief that the language instructor is the key to effective teaching. An experienced instructor's knowledge and skill regarding methods of instruction may be compared to a technician's toolbox. The instructor's tools are teaching methods. Just as the technician uses some tools more than others, the instructor will use some methods more often than others. As is the case with the technician, there are times when a less used tool will be the exact tool

needed for a particular situation. The instructor's success, the presenter believes, is determined to a large degree by the ability to organise material as well as select and utilise a teaching method appropriate to a particular teaching situation. The variety of approaches, theories, and activities proposed within the field of EFL literature should provide language instructors with an insight into what tool is needed for a particular situation and why a particular tool is needed rather than any others (see Parts Five and Six for details).

To conclude, it would be appropriate to view literature: novels and short stories, as an effective device which EFL practitioners can utilise, to enhance not only language skills, but also cultural awareness and critical thinking. What is more, being acquainted with stylistics raises EFL students' awareness of certain features of language, enables them to implement the knowledge in their language production, promotes their language competence, as well as enhances their critical thinking skills. To meet challenges; satisfy demands; as well as fulfil requirements, the selection process of appropriate literary texts, the adoption of effective approaches and strategies, and the implementation of purposeful curriculum, will all yield in quality education for all to learn and gain.

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