

Online and Offline Approaches to Literary Texts
As an Effective Tool in Liberal Arts

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Abstract

The present research has been launched in order to reevaluate literary texts as the potential tool in liberal arts, along with the commencement of the book club that consists of the university students outside of the literary field, most of who have not been instructed how literary texts should be linguistically analyzed. There are two key factors in the research. First, the activity is a traditional type of community reading which enables the participants to interact with each other profoundly through face-to-face discussion and deepen their thoughts based on the others' opinions. Secondly, a short story is used as a text, which seems suitable for close reading. This paper reports on the assessment of the students' development of linguistic awareness by showing some examples of their analysis of a short story by Ernest Hemingway according to the following points: symbol, point of view, textual gap, etc. It also introduces the social reading networking system being developed to accomplish the pedagogical objectives. The research finds, as a result, that close analysis of literary texts provides what is called 'novice-readers' with the sensitivity to language, and that both online and offline discussions can enhance the opportunity of cultivating or developing their critical thinking ability.

Keywords: pedagogical stylistics, linguistic awareness, community reading, social reading networking system

1 Introduction

I started the book club together with some of the students in my university in 2009, where we have been reading British or American short stories since then. The reason why I wanted to have a regular reading session as an extracurricular activity is closely related to the present things with reading in Japan. There are a growing number of younger generations who dislike or avoid reading any texts, especially traditional literary works in general, and besides literary works tend to be undervalued, and have been almost avoided as a reading material in language education for some practical reasons; e.g. they are not considered to be valid in enhancing students' language skills, especially communicative competence. However, I have known, by intuition or from experience, that literary texts should be not merely an effective tool to promote language proficiency but also the promising potential to develop the skill of analysis, critical literacy, creative expression, etc.

Based on the research question, 'how literary reading "would go beyond the acquisition of a linguistic toolkit"' (Zyngier and Fialho, 15) towards that of critical perspectives to a given text, this

paper first examines the book club activity as the offline approach to literary texts by stating how stylistics has been utilized in the club for what pedagogical purposes and how effectively community reading works to facilitate readers to cultivate themselves. After giving an account of the model of a reader's development that I built on the theoretical frameworks and my observations on the book club activity, the social reading networking system, the one that provides the student members with an extra opportunity of discussing or sharing ideas on a given text online, will be discussed.

2 The offline approach to literary texts

The objective of the book club is to develop critical literacy as well as linguistic sensitivity by reading literary pieces stylistically. This activity has two pedagogical keys: stylistic analysis of literary texts and community reading. All the members in the club are non-literature majors. They did not receive any formal instruction about stylistics and had not participated in this kind of regular reading session before. Therefore the book club project seemed to serve as a test of effect of stylistics on them. It is generally said that stylistics works with both non-literary and literary works. There is no language specific to literature and no linguistic difference between literary and non-literary texts as already discussed in linguistics. In this club, however, literary texts have been solely read and analyzed stylistically. Usually readers should respond to literary works in a quite different way because they are fiction but have 'true-to-life' nature. Literary texts reflect the reality in a fictional setting, and the reader is emotionally involved with them, which I think makes some functional differences between literary and non-literary texts.

The second key spurs the participants, especially the ones who do not like reading very much, to join the club. Community reading can be an incentive to join the club because all the participants can share ideas with the others and have an opportunity of a discussion there. A discussion is more important especially in pedagogical viewpoint because one can get conscious of and know the others' perspectives and acquire an objective view towards a given text.

Our reading community has no other selection than a short story as a text since stylistic approach is taken here. Linguistic analysis requires readers to trace the maze of a literary text more than once, so its length of a text does matter to them. Authors also take much time to polish a text when they write a short story. In terms of a selection of word that should be done to produce a textual effect, in the interview with Jean Stein in 1956, William Faulkner stated his opinion about writing a short story as follows:

In a short story that's next to the poem, almost every word has got to be almost right...because it demands a nearer absolute exactitude.... It's got to be absolutely impeccable, absolutely perfect. (Heller, 47)

A short story has more elaborate sentences consisting of 'almost exactly right' words. About James Joyce, too, there is an episode that proves a short story is an exquisite work of art: he still went on

revising the draft of 'A Painful Case' in *Dubliners* while writing *Ulysses*. In this short piece of work, one of the main characters, Mrs. Sinico, becomes a victim of a train accident in the middle of the story. Then, Joyce depicts her death by the use of the word 'killed', which it took him much time to decide to choose instead of the other candidate 'died'. He was also fastidious about his choice of words in producing this piece. For Hemingway, the same can be said of his style of writing. He wrote a story based on that famous 'iceberg theory' (the theory of omission): expressing the most by the least, in other words, by choosing a word very carefully and omitting a word/words deliberately to make a textual gap. Therefore a short story can be considered as an almost immaculate text suitable for stylistic analysis.

The latter half of this section observes the session in which we read 'Hills Like White Elephants' by Hemingway, and shows stylistic analysis and community reading work well. The discussion there chiefly focused on the following two points: the phrase coined probably by the author, 'let the air in', and the words by the woman at the bar, 'Four reales'. Most of the students took the former words literally; they merely understood that a girl called Jig let the air into her body by 'some' kind of operation, but did not know that the couple was discussing the serious issue 'abortion' because the girl was pregnant. One of the members, however, construed that they had sexual relations, and that Jig was pregnant from the passage mentioning the hotels they stayed at: 'There were labels on [the bags] from all the hotels where they spent nights' (Hemingway, 54). His explanation was appropriately based on the evidence of the words in the text, so the others were persuaded to believe his reading was right.

The discussion on the words 'Four reales' was ignited by the question raised by one of the participants, 'why did the woman at the bar answer 'Four reales' to an American guy's word 'Listen'?' Supposedly the author did write the story on the theory of omission, and some crucial omissions, which serve as a foil to what is written, can be recognized in this text. The woman's abrupt reply 'Four reales' is written in spite of being apparently less loaded with meanings while the scene in which the drink is served after the guy's placing an order of it is omitted. It is this deliberate act of expression Hemingway took which shows the phrase 'Four reales' is of great significance in the text. The students went on to discuss how it functioned and what influence it had on the text as a whole. Their discussion found that the woman at the bar misunderstood an American guy's 'Listen' as his asking for a bill, and that the words 'Four reales' would symbolize 'misunderstanding' or 'disagreement', i.e. it would imply a discord between the guy and Jig. Thus the discussion led to this unexpectedly outstanding interpretation.

By their interactions through community reading, along with stylistic analysis, the students have been gradually learning how to read a text. The result of the survey conducted in May 2011 finds that most of the students (9 out of 10) have been getting aware of a 'point of view' in a narrative as one of the keys to understanding of a given text; and they have been getting more sensitive to words in a text compared with what they were before they joined the club. Apart from these improvements, there are some other instances that show their growth as a reader: some of them were inspired by stylistic analysis and created their original literary texts, short stories; and

the others pointed out the intertextuality between ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ and ‘A Perfect Day for Kangaroo’ by Murakami Haruki as one of the modernist novelists in Japan. Murakami has been influenced by Hemingway, and his style is in part similar to Hemingway’s in that short story.

3 The online approach to literary texts

Thus community reading had some positive influence on the student readers as a whole, including novice ones. It seemed, however, that another kinds of extra and supplementary activities must be needed in order to achieve some pedagogical purposes: deepening understanding more based on an outcome of discussion, cultivating critical literacy, and creating a literary text, etc. Then, a social reading networking system, which would play an important role in improving the above-mentioned abilities, was designed based on the model of a reader’s development. This model originated from the two theories stated respectively by two types of stylisticians: Leech and Short, and Zyngier and Fialho; and it was integrated based on my learning from the book club activity.

Leech and Short describe literary stylistics as at once elucidation of artistic beauty based on linguistic evidence and explication of linguistic function based on aesthetic effect, as shown in Figure 1, which is quoted from *Style in Fiction*.

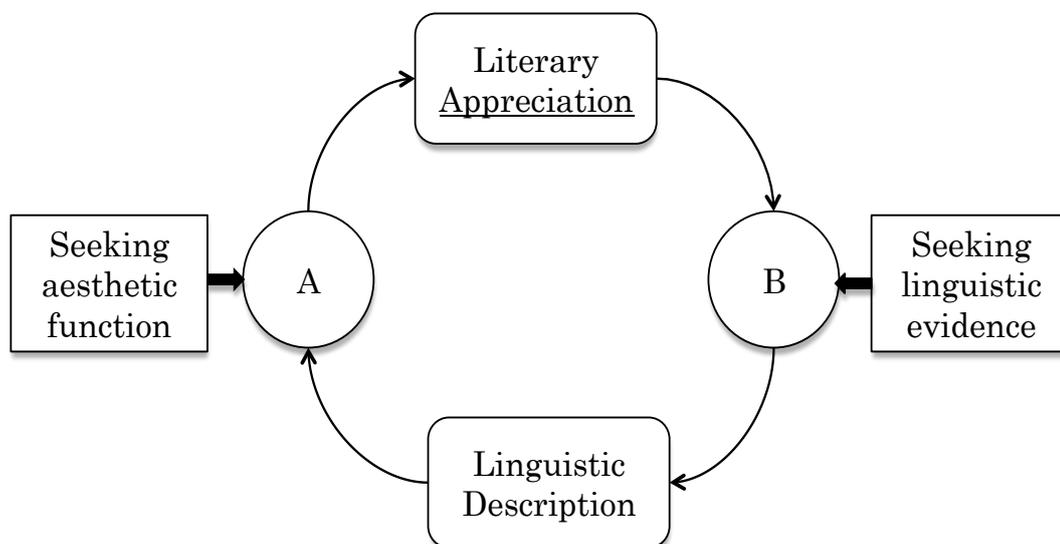


Figure 1

Based on Spitzer’s argument over ‘the task of linguistic-literary explanation’, they go on to explain a reader’s cognitive process by the above figure as follows:

There is a cyclic motion whereby linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and whereby literary insight in turn stimulates further linguistic observation.... There is no logical starting point, since we bring to a literary text simultaneously two

faculties, however imperfectly developed: our ability to respond to it as a literary work and our ability to observe its language. (Leech and Short, 12)

They focus on the cognitive aspect of what is happening in a reader's mind here, while Zyngier and Fialho concentrate their attention on the affective one. The latter describe 'a process in which the reader awakens to and takes cognizance of the verbal artistry of a literary text' (Zyngier and Fialho, 15) by the following four 'moments': from the first moment 'reaction' through 'awareness' and 'interpretation' in the middle to the final one 'creation'. The crux of their theory can be seen in Figure 2, which I made based on my understanding of their explication of the process (Zyngier and Fialho, 15).

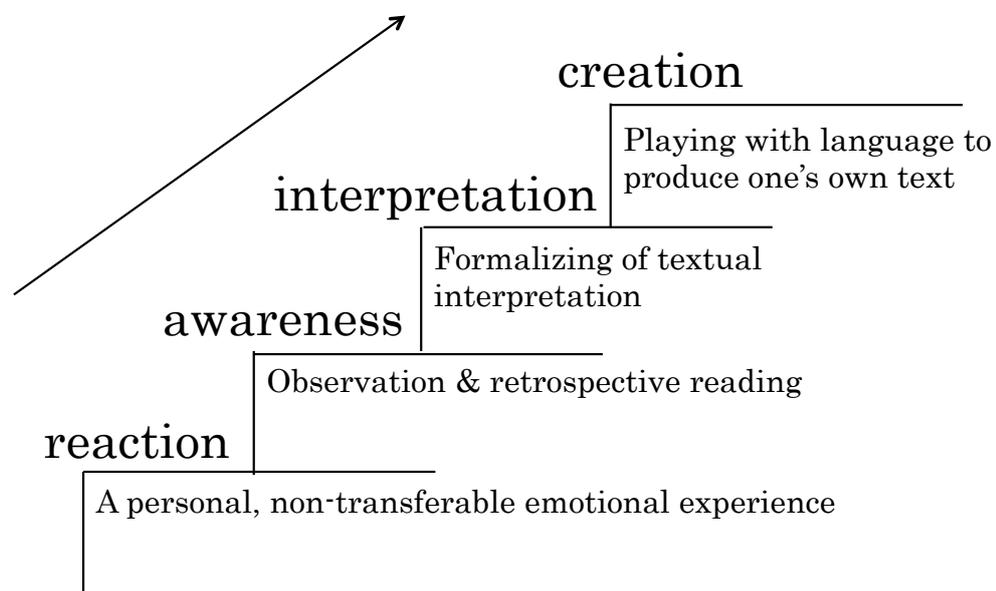


Figure 2

The reaction stage is most emphasized here because it is related to affective function that the reader experiences. According to Zyngier and Fialho, most stylisticians put less value on the emotional workings in the reader's mind and pay more attention to the cognitive process, but there is 'a need to focus on the role feelings play in literary reading' (Zyngier and Fialho, 15) in terms of a pedagogical approach to style in fiction. The second moment of 'awareness' seems equivalent to what Leech and Short describe about the above-mentioned cyclic motion where the reader has his/her own 'observation' on a given text after reading and later, again, returns to and retraces the text in search of linguistic evidences. Through the first and second moments, the reader can gradually learn to 'interpret' the text. From the pedagogical perspective, however, Zyngier and Fialho set a higher objective, the moment of 'creation', in their theoretical schema that should be achieved through the experience of stylistic reading. Here I depend more on Zyngier and Fialho's for theoretical framework, but want to integrate into theirs 'community reading' as an essential factor that would activate the second moment much more. Figure 3 shows my model of a reader's development, based on which I have been running the book club.

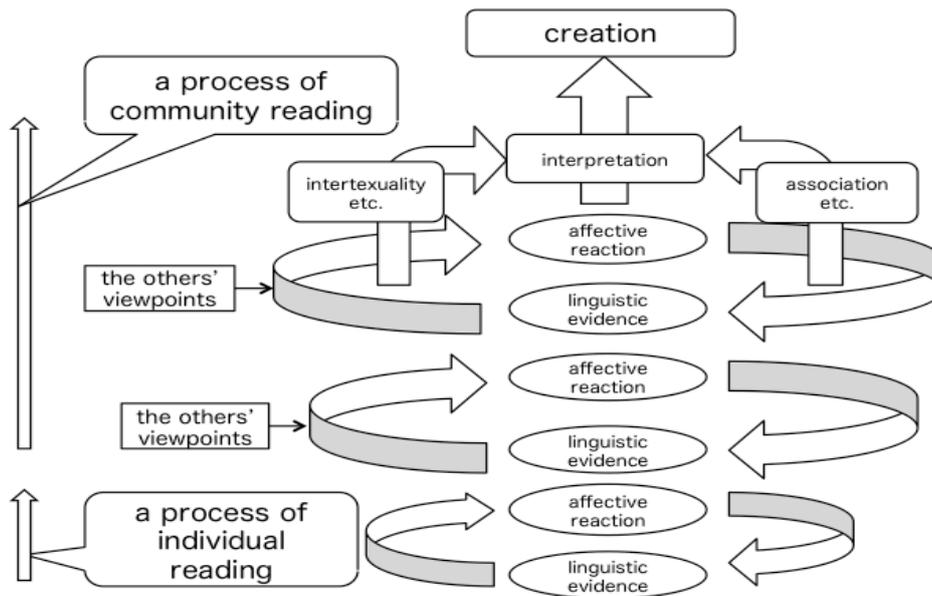


Figure 3

The cyclic motion here is equivalent to a combination of that of Leech and Short with the first two moments by Zyngier and Fialho, and its gradual upward growth signifies that the reader advances in deepening his/her understanding of the text while or after interacting with the others in a reading session, through which s/he may associate the text with the others, or explicate it, and finally create his/her own text, etc. This figure also shows that there are two processes the reader experiences in the book club activity: that of individual reading and that of community reading.

Figure 4 is concerned with Figure 3, and makes it clear which stage with the attainment of goals is related to which function in the networking system which I designed in order to offer an opportunity for all the members of the club to state their opinions or ideas about a given text, adding some commentary, etc., twenty four hours a day.

Stage	Development as a Reader	SRNS
Creation	Create one's own text, do a review, etc.	'BiblioBattle' implemented
Interpretation	Explain the meaning of a given text based on definite linguistic evidences	'Interactive E-Texts' work in progress
Community Reading	Accept or reject the others' viewpoints by giving linguistic evidences etc. through interaction	'Portfolio' work in progress
Individual Reading	Construct one's opinions on a given text through a cyclic motion between affective reaction and linguistic evidence	'ActiveLogs' implemented

Figure 4

As of July in 2012, all the system has not been completed, so I'll explain one of the two implemented functions in the system, 'BiblioBattle'. I got this conception from the project 'Biblio Battle' that was originated by Associate Professor Taniguchi Tadahiro at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. It is a kind of game where people make a short speech of what they read and win against a rival if their speech is more persuasive. In this networking system, the aims of 'BiblioBattle' are not only to boost the students' opportunities to read more books, but also to enhance their ability to state their own opinion more logically, i.e. to do a review of a book. To evaluate and review a book requires the reader to obtain an objective perspective and to grasp the whole text objectively.

4 Conclusion

The originality of this research lies in the positive combination of the stylistic approach with community reading. Even if a text is not accessible, community reading is a motivation to struggle with it, and also provides a reader with an opportunity of sharing ideas or exchanging opinions face-to-face immediately. Through discussion of analysis of a text based on linguistic evidence, a reader can internalize the others' perspectives and learn to view the text objectively. This offline approach to literary texts, along with the online one, should be effective in increasing chances of reading among younger generation and developing their critical literacy as well as linguistic sensitivity.

* In this article, 'literary texts' or 'literary works' are limited to fiction, not including essay or the equivalent.

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