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Language through Literature:
Creative Language Teaching through Literature
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Written by an expert in literary theory, on the one hand, and an expert in applied linguistics and methodology, on the other, this book contains some novel features in its organisation and presentation which are based on several radical postulates about both language and literature. Although the title might suggest that it is a text for language teachers only, the aim of its authors is to help both language and literature teachers, an aim which springs from their basic assumption that literature should be part of a complete language learning experience.

Fundamental to their approach are the following concerns: the tendency of placing understanding texts ahead of viewing the learner as a resource and of working from the learner's store of experience and intuitive poetic awareness; the need for creative writing to be taught as a basic literary practice; the need for a change of methodology in the teaching of foreign literature to bring it more into line with the learner-centred, collaborative approach of the communicative method; disagreement with language teachers who are uncertain about the use of literature in the language classroom and with literature teachers who ignore language. As there are already many anthologies of literary works available for teachers, this book is designed differently. The aim is not to show people 'how to' read literature as if there were a right and a wrong way, but to replace what Bassnet and Grundy call a 'spirit of humility', with a 'spirit of discovery'. In other words, instead of being overawed in the face of a great work by a great writer, the reader should be encouraged to read for the pleasure of finding not only new worlds opening up in the imagination, but also of discovering new layers of language being used and of seeing how new examples of linguistic dexterity are opposed. Shakespeare, for example, should be read not so much because he is regarded as a master, but because his skill in using language is a pleasure to be enjoyed. The pleasure principle, including the key component of surprise, is considered a crucial component of learning.

In general terms, the exercises are designed to help students to appreciate the poetic dimension of the everyday language they want to acquire and to develop intuitions as to stylistic preferences as an important part of language learning. The book is divided into eight chapters with some containing as few as eight and others as many as seventeen activities, 'exercises' not in the sense of being mechanical or habitual but because they are part of a continuous skill-building practice.

The authors do not suggest a specific methodology for a *literature syllabus*, but argue implicitly for a syllabus that is method or approach-centred rather than built around subject matter. On the whole, they are in agreement with David Nunan's view (Nunan 1988a and b) that method/approach are more important than, and not absolutely indivisible from, the material we work with. In order to get the best out of

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the text, detailed, step-by-step instructions are given as well as descriptions of the aim of the exercise which often reflects a linguistic, a critical or a pedagogic principle. This section and the "Note" sometimes included at the end, are designed to stimulate thought about the particular exercise and about language teaching in general. Although within each chapter the exercises are sequenced from those which work from the learner's knowledge or experience to those which are based on text, the authors, following the pleasure principle, advise teachers to select the exercises having the most appeal.

In the sections of the introduction devoted to "Methodology" and "Rationale" are to be found the fundamentals of their views on language teaching. Their methodology aims at achieving autonomy: to help the student to reach a stage without the involvement of teaching. In order to do this, student initiative is considered more important than teacher control, learner-centredness is vital, doubts are raised as to how to quantify the outcome of successful second language learning, and individualisation is an essential factor. Other aspects of their methodology involve the constant changing of teacher and learner roles, and that of motivation in which learners-by-choice rather than learners-by-obligation should be aimed at. The prime resource is the learner's knowledge and experience of life and the learner's in-built syllabus. Teaching model structures involving the repetition of rehearsed responses, a technique based on behaviourist psychology, is rejected in favour of a methodology which helps learners to find ways of expressing the meanings that are important to them. Finally, importance is given to the emotional responses of the learners to the language, to literature, and to the learning situation and the target culture.

In their consideration of the notions of innateness and readiness, the authors claim that we are all equally capable of acquiring a second language, but that we are not all equally ready to start doing so; we all have strong personal feelings, but we are not all equally ready to share them; and although we are all equally able to respond and contribute, we are not all ready to do so. This is why the form of collaboration must be handled with sensitivity. In group work, for example, the shared responsibility makes the learner less anxious and more productive. The learner has a right to silence and his or her occasional silences must be respected from a linguistic and humanistic point of view. A student should say 'Pass' when unwilling to share in either the oral or written work.

Radical and stimulating assertions are made in their four-point Rationale section. The issues to be considered by language teachers who are thinking about the role of literature in their classroom are the following: How does literature relate to everyday language? Isn't literature for advanced learners only?, 'Speaking comes before writing', and 'Literature enshrines the values of a society'.

With regard to the first issue, the authors maintain that when we teach English we are not only teaching a language, but we are also teaching students about what language can do, and that a fundamental principle of this book is that literature, both literary practice and working with texts, should be part of "everyday second language acquisition". And yet, they say, "most of us who teach English as a second language have tended to put literature into a separate compartment for advanced specialist learners. We have elevated speaking over writing, and especially over creative writing. We think of literature as representing the values of a culture. In all these ways we have failed to remember just how everyday literature actually is" (p. 8).

Their answer to the second question, 'Isn't literature for advanced learners?', is a definite, 'No'. In the text under review, there are nearly as many exercises for beginner/elementary students as for intermediate and advanced ones, one of the chief factors which distinguishes it from other texts which are at all comparable. Their linguistic and methodological reasons for this view are based on the belief held by many applied linguists that in acquiring a second language we first take a step back from our mother tongue. This enables us to reactivate a language learning 'device' which, in turn, enables us to acquire a syntax and a phonology different from those of

our mother tongue. This is the childlike state where the harmonies, the poetic structures, the 'music' of a language as Gattegno (1972, 1976) called it, are more obvious to us than at any other stage in second-language learning. At this time, more than at any other, we are receptive to literature. Contrary to popular opinion, they say, the more advanced we become, the less accessible, the less useful, literature will be.

The third issue, dealing with the claim that 'Speaking comes before writing', observed by almost all language teaching methodology with listening and speaking being placed ahead of reading and writing, is reconsidered by the authors, who point out that 'writing' occurs in both literate and non-literate societies. Yet, the poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was not literate and had to wait several centuries before these poems were written down. All societies have a wide variety of non-literal or poetic language uses, and in non-literate societies these are not, for obvious reasons, ever written down. In literate societies we tend to think of writing as representing speech, which of course it sometimes does, just as speech can represent writing. Actually, say the authors, it might be more sensible to use the word 'writing', whether in literate or non-literate societies, to describe the most striking examples of our innate ability to combine linguistic tokens creatively, whether in 'speech' or in 'writing'. This perspective on 'writing', that it is a *natural, creative, original,* and perhaps *primary* use of language, surely argues for the importance of literature (or 'writing') in the language classroom, claim the authors.

The final issue of their 'Rationale' is the age-old view that 'Literature enshrines the values of a society'. They are opposed to the idea of national literatures and "great" writers, which, by implication, means that someone else's literature will convey, not universal values, but the values of their own culture, a point which has been made forcefully by Ngugi wa Thiongo'o in his paper, "Literature in Schools" (1986). In this paper, he complains about the way most literature teaching excludes those who do not belong and represent only a partial view of the world, as in the case of African schools in which only European literature is taught, a literature either reflecting the European image, or a distorted image of themselves (Africans) as seen from a European perspective. According to Bassnet and Grundy, while it often suits us to see ourselves as members of a nation or of a community –political, religious or perhaps just constituted by the town, the village, or even street, where we live–, such communities exclude those with different backgrounds or perspectives. They call upon Mary Louise Pratt's (1987) recent challenge to this notion of community which she calls an idealisation related to notions such as 'fraternity' and 'nation state' and which should be replaced by a 'linguistics of contact'. It is only when and because a speaker of British English and a speaker of American English come into contact, for example, that they realise which variety they speak, or indeed, says Pratt, that they speak a variety at all. It is precisely this contact with the other that gives them their sense of group membership and linguistic identity. What often occurs, according to Bassnet and Grundy, is that we create literature out of innate, universal, human skills and then think of them as conveying the values of a particular community or culture. Their book is opposed to this spirit and to the idea of accepted readings and the need to serve an apprenticeship before being accepted into the community of those who can read English literature with an English understanding. Their exercises intend to focus precisely on what happens when readers and writers of very different languages and cultures come into contact. The authors are convinced that everyone, and *especially* early-stage, second-language learners, can read literature and write creatively.

This, then, is the theorising underlining the following eight chapters into which the book is divided: Chapter I, Differences and discoveries; Chapter 2, One text; Chapter 3, Pre-reading; Chapter 4, Reading; Chapter 5, Translation; Chapter 6, Writing; Chapter 7, Beginners; Chapter 8, Advanced learners. All the exercises in Chapter I are concerned in one way or another with exploring differences. As the introduction points out: "Every stage in the process of learning from the baby struggling to make intelligible sounds to the post-graduate student completing a doc-

toral thesis, involves dealing with things that are different, and consequently in making new discoveries" (p. 11). The aim is to help learners pass from the fearfulness that awareness of difference can at first provoke to the sense of excitement generated by discovery. Many of the exercises are designed to establish group identity and to help the students to feel at ease with the teacher. Another purpose of the exercises is to break down inhibitions in the classroom and encourage the students to use their linguistic skills in more imaginative ways. The principle behind these first exercises is the simple one that students of all ages work best when they are actively involved in the process and are not passive receivers of information or instruction. The exercises include such activities as making a poem out of the student's name, telling a story and concentrating on the way it is told, re-telling stories, and re-working and re-shaping poems. In Chapter 2, One text, all the exercises are based on one text, the poem "I remember, I remember" by Thomas Hardy. The aim is to illustrate the many different ways of working with the same text and that there is not a simple right approach. The particular aim (for short poems and stories) is to establish the subject matter and type of text in the minds of the students before they read it. The activities in this chapter include predicting, grouping, exchanging, assessing, translating, exemplifying, visualising, associating, meaning, contributing, clozing, substituting, contrasting, completing, evaluating, and reducing. Chapter 3, Pre-reading, aims at allowing students to read a poem impressionistically and to interpret it in their own way before anyone imposes a received viewpoint on them. In Chapter 4, Reading, group oral work is used as many difficulties for beginners may be *technical* linguistic ones. Chapter 5, Translation, continues the theme of cultural differences. The aim is to make students aware of some of the conscious and unconscious processes in transferring from one linguistic system to another. International jokes and idioms are translated to demonstrate the notions of 'universal' and 'culture-bound' idioms. In the exercises of Chapter 6, Writing, shape poems, a 50-word novel and syllable poems are featured. Three stages are involved in each activity: reading, discussion and optional writing. Chapter 7, Beginners, includes drama and speech acts, while in Chapter 8, Advanced learners, the book finishes with the discussion of a text: Philip Larkin's poem, "Wild Oats", with a variety of exercises.

Language through Literature is daring in its aims. The number, range and organisation of the exercises would seem to demonstrate the authors' intentions and to provide a refreshing alternative text for teachers of language and some food for thought for literature teachers.

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