

Intercultural reading of A. S. Byatt's *The Chinese Lobster* *

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The authors argue that the literary text, which has tended to be neglected in the language classroom largely as a result of adherence to structuralist guidelines, offers rich grounds for use in a university language course. The authors discuss different approaches to using a literary text, in this case *The Chinese Lobster* by A.S.Byatt, including lexical and discourse analysis, both of which need to be viewed through the prism of culture in order to help deal with problems of interculturality that inevitably arise in the language classroom.

In this paper we propose to look at how literary texts can be used as a resource for stimulating and promoting language learning in an intercultural context. This is based on experience of teaching university level students who are majoring in English at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb.

At one stage literature occupied a prominent role in foreign language teaching. It was believed to represent the best models of writing while at the same time illustrating grammatical rules of the language. Later on during the dominance of the structuralist approach, literary texts were pushed out of the language learning curriculum and considered to be part of traditional old-fashioned methods. In the last ten years, with the impact of cultural studies, literary texts have experienced a comeback in the language classroom.

The justification for using a literary text in an intercultural environment lies not only in its intrinsic value and interest, but also in the scope it can provide for building up the language and for developing language skills, which is where our interest lies, to say nothing of the tremendous impact it has on the development of more general skills such

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as critical and analytical abilities to benefit the general education process and the development of the individual.

A literary text meets two very important criteria that ELT researchers of the last decade have been insisting on. Those are meaningful exposure to language and the use of authentic materials. The best arguments in favour of authentic texts occupying a central role in language learning pedagogy are the three arguments advanced by Little, Devitt and Singleton (1983).

First, because they have been written for a communicative purpose they are more interesting than texts which have been invented to illustrate the usage of some feature of the target language. Secondly, because they revolve around content rather than form authentic texts are more likely to have acquisition-promoting content than invented texts. This is because they provide a rich linguistic diet, and partly because they encourage learners to concentrate on penetrating to the meaning that lies beneath the surface structures. Thirdly, if used in sufficient quantities authentic texts can begin to replicate the "language bath" in which the first language learner is immersed from birth.

The literary text, just like any authentic text that the authors talk about, raises student motivation because it makes a genuine demand on them to communicate ideas, attitudes and feelings, as well as a genuine interest in what others have to say, thus they provide a context for meaningful social interaction. The fact, which is no longer disputed, about the literary text being open to multiple interpretation and negotiation of meaning, results in a natural gap which invites authentic interaction.

As peripheral as it may seem from the point of view of English language teaching, the literary experience engenders fundamental concepts about human nature and society and creates a framework of values which are essential in any attempt to understand human life, especially in a world of multiculturalism.

In a recent article "Northrop Frye on the Teaching of English" published in the journal "The Use of English" (1996), Joy Alexander reminds us of the tremendous importance the outstanding Canadian critic Northrop Frye assigned to the role of literature in society and to the teaching of English. He insisted that no study of English, no matter how utilitarian, should lose touch with literature and the language of imagination which is central to it. Communication skills, which have been catapulted into prominence of late, are in his view peripheral, and by emphasising "effective" communication in order to become "audible in the market place" they distract us from essential matters. This is a controversial view that many ELT specialists would definitely disagree with.

His point is that the cultivation of speech is not just some skill like playing chess, and that you cannot cultivate speech beyond a certain point if you have nothing to say. One of the great advantages of using literary texts in the language classroom is that they offer rich cultural content, ideas and ideologies which all generate a genuine need for communication.

It is our experience that even university students majoring in English in non-English speaking countries face grave difficulties when encountering a literary text in English. Broadly speaking, we found that these difficulties concern linguistic and cultural areas. The linguistic side can be said to involve lexical analysis, concentrating on lexical items, words, phrases, clauses and sentences and discourse analysis which goes beyond sentences and looks at larger stretches of language organisation. In other words, discourse analysis takes account of the context in which a piece of discourse occurs.

At the same time, in the text as a cultural site, we have at work, as Foucault says, an intricate symbolic system, a system that is a construction of meaning through the exercise of power, in other words the aesthetic may embody political rationality and the mundane artefact carries with it synchronicities of control and inhibition in other areas of social life. (Jenks, 1993, p.144) This political input is easily overlooked, especially by the struggling L2 reader, in the grip of the enjoyment of a good read.

The world created by the literary text relies for its meanings on the language and simultaneously we bring to the interpretation social, cultural and experiential moments. As language teachers at university level we feel it is imperative that a student be able to deal with language as the medium in which meanings are encoded.

Our paper is based on work in our language class with Second Year university students majoring in the English Language and Literature at the University of Zagreb. It involved reading Antonia Susan Byatt's short story *The Chinese Lobster* from her collection *The Matisse Stories*. Although the story is 30 pages long, we felt it merited our decision to read it in the class because it addresses contemporary issues that we believed would be interesting to our students: sexual harassment, the existing power structure in the relations between the sexes, the relationships between professors and students in a different cultural context, and postmodernist influences on the artistic canon.

Although our students' knowledge of the English language is fairly advanced, or rather their communication skills are quite good, their awareness of the complexities of language is inadequate and superficial. From our previous experience we learned that even misunderstanding of a single lexical item can lead a student to interpret the story in a completely inaccurate way.

For example, our students took a lexical item *pink slip* from Raymond Carver's story *Are These Actual Miles* and interpreted it as meaning a piece of lingerie although completely unwarranted by the context, thus arriving at the conclusion that the husband in the story was encouraging his wife to go and sleep with another man in order to get a better deal on the sale of their car, when in fact he was asking her if she had the car's ownership papers with her. Interestingly, the students were quite comfortable with their interpretation and it did not occur to them to question the overall implications for the story.

In another instance they mistook *stretch marks* for *scratch marks* and therefore concluded that the wife in the same story had been manhandled by the car dealer.

Clearly lexical problems pose the first serious obstacle the student encounters in reading an authentic text in L2. Based on the above and many other examples we felt

that it was essential to concentrate on lexical analysis as the first stage in our approach to *The Chinese Lobster*.

Looking at the lexis the student is guided in gaining insights into the characters and events and gradually creates meaning. This forces the student to reconsider and redefine her perceptions about the story all the time, but also to become aware of the power of language which the students invariably disregard. The reason for this may be found in the fact that for almost half a century we have been living in a culture which did not encourage, to put it mildly, an active analytical inquisitive spirit. On the contrary, we had acquiesced to being spoon-fed and to passively accepting precepts passed down to us by those in positions of power and authority.

Lexical analysis seemed very appropriate because it soon became transparent that the author's choice of language is painstakingly deliberate. Focusing on the lexical features of the text, one of the things the students noticed was the prominence of colours in the story. The numerous examples included the description of Gerda Himmelblau's favourite clothing colours:

She wears suits in soft dark, not-quite-usual colours - damsons, soots, black tulips, dark mosses - with clean-cut cotton shirts ... also in clear colours, palest lemon, deepest cream, periwinkle, faded flame. (p. 99)

Also she notices and likes the colours in the restaurant:

Dr Himmelblau likes the colour-mixture, the bright blue-green and the saturated scarlet, so nearly the same weight. (p. 94)

The description of the display case again draws attention to colours:

The display is brightly lit, and arranged on a carpet of that fierce emerald green artificial grass used by greengrocers and undertakers. Round the edges on open shells, is a border of raw scallops, the purly flesh dulling, the repeating half-moons of the orange-pink roses playing against the fierce green.

These three descriptions, which occur early in the story, led us to conclude that colours were going to figure importantly in the development of the story, and that they tell us much about the inner world of the characters. We were overwhelmed by Gerda Himmelblau's sophisticated awareness of colours that she sees around and of those that she chooses to wear.

Further on, a close study of the text reveals a certain duality between Gerda Himmelblau's physical appearance and her psychological make-up. The fact that 'her body is sharp and angular, as is her Roman nose and her judiciously tightened mouth', that 'she has never had much style of her own,... - only an acerbic accuracy, which is an easy style for a very clever woman', all of this is suggestive of masculinity. Whereas on the other hand 'her suits are cut soft', her colours are pale, soft 'deepest cream' and 'palest lemon' - these suggest a feminine sensibility.

Even in her name there is a duality, Gerda sounds harsh, at least to a Croatian reader, because of the association of the name with the meaning of the word *ugly*. Her second name, on the other hand, in translation means *blue skies*.

Since the interpretation of an isolated lexical item is determined by co-text as Halliday says, one needs to go beyond lexical phrases and look at larger stretches of the text and how the text is put together as a whole. In other words, we need to look at text as discourse. It is discourse analysis then that makes us look at a text in its entirety and helps us become aware of why certain parts of text appear at exactly the place that they do.

Moreover, the study of discourse can provide insights into the fictional world of the literary text because, as Brown and Yule point out, the discourse analyst treats his data "as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express meanings and achieve intentions(discourse)." (1983, p. 26) Contextual considerations necessarily involve pragmatics as an area of linguistic study.

At some point in the discussion, the students commented that the dialogue between the main characters at the beginning of their luncheon meeting was trivial, inappropriate and indicated their lack of sensitivity, given the seriousness of the matter they were going to discuss. At the beginning of their conversation Dr Himmelblau offers an excuse for not having asked professor Diss if he liked Chinese food, to which he replies with another pleasantry:

Chinese food - well-cooked, of course - is one of the great triumphs of the human species. Such delicacy, such intricacy, such simplicity, and so peaceful in the ageing stomach. (p. 107)

And he goes on in the same vein:

I shall ask you to be my guide through the plethora of the menu. I do not think I can face Fried Crispy Bowels, however much, in principle, I believe in venturing into the unknown. Are you partial to steamed oysters with ginger and spring onions? So intense, so light a flavour - (p. 107)

In order to interpret this dialogue we have to take into account the context, who the interlocutors are and the level of familiarity between them, as well as the time and place of the production of the discourse. The function of this exchange should be seen in the light of its cultural implications - ice breaking dialogue to establish initial contact and rapport between two persons of equal standing in a predictably socially uneasy situation. How does one tell an esteemed colleague that he has been accused of sexual harassment? The students did not grasp the cultural meaning of the social context.

Clear boundaries in discourse are not always easily discernible, which can obfuscate the meaning and create difficulties for the L2 reader; indeed, this is true not only for her, but also for any untrained native speaker/reader. The end of *The Chinese Lobster*

offers an excellent illustration - the dialogue between Himmelblau and Diss poses serious problems for the reader:

'I find that *absolutely appalling*, you know,' says Perry Diss. 'And at the same time, exactly at the same time, I don't give a damn? D'you know?'

'I know,' says Gerda Himmelblau. She does know. Cruelly, imperfectly, voluptuously, clearly.

The reference of these utterances is ambiguous because the contiguity principle does not necessarily hold here. At first, the reader might conclude that the conversation refers to the glass display case containing the dying lobster and crabs in front of which they are standing, taking them in, which is exactly what our students did. An insightful reader will see that the utterances refer to much more and that the interlocutors *mean* much more. Perry Diss was also expressing his disappointment with the fact that Peggy Nollett would eventually get her degree, which in his view Nollett's talent and work definitely do not merit.

Gerda Himmelblau's response warrants a multiplicity of references, i.e. possibilities of interpretation - it connects Peggy Nollett's, Perry Diss's and Himmelblau's and even Matisse's lives with the image of the lobster and crabs in the display case.

This reinforces the reader's perception at the beginning of the story, when the same image occurs, and the student intuitively grasps that the image would figure significantly as the narrative develops. The writer's positioning of parts of discourse in the text draws our attention to the importance of discourse organisation.

Lexical and discourse based analyses should not be seen as grafted on, or as isolated approaches to the story, but as integral parts of the complex interactive process that takes place in the language classroom, thus raising awareness in the student. As McCarthy and Carter point out, 'language is not unproblematically transparent and neutral; language is a site in which beliefs, values and points of view are produced, encoded and contested.' (1994, p. 155) It is clear that in her story Byatt has made some culturally and ideologically determined choices - she chooses to place her story in an academic setting; it is not incidental that her characters are middle-class white intellectuals. The cultural issues she deals with are artistic canon, sexual harassment, and the changing asymmetrical power relationships between the sexes. Diss and Himmelblau interact as each other's equals. The student's complaint of sexual harassment and her awareness of her rights is a reflection of the changed ideological climate in British universities.

Although the story is deeply rooted in specific cultural and ideological contexts, the students recognised the underlying universal themes of despair, loneliness and the urge towards self-annihilation, as implied in Perry Diss' words:

'... You look around you and everything is bleached, and clear, as you say. You are in a white box, a white room, with no doors or windows. You are looking through clear water with no movement - perhaps it is more like being inside ice, inside the white room. There is only one thing possible. It is all perfectly clear and simple and plain. ...'

In a written response a student very aptly summed up this universal concern of the story:

Gradually by talking about some very painful and sensitive aspects of Peggy Nollett's life, Dr Himmelblau and Professor Diss discovered an area of human despair known to both of them. They have both been there, they have seen the same white walls that Peggy Nollett saw. The bond of mutual understanding was established, they were connected by the same fears and experiences. Each of them managed to see the light, they learned to deal with their fears. That's what changed their relationship, this moment of sharing their most painful experience without many words.

In the course of the class discussion, from something impersonal and remote the students had become involved in the story and were beginning to appreciate and enjoy it. They became aware that meaning is not necessarily inherent in the text, but that it is created by the interaction between the text and the reader. In our case the students were working with the text in groups and aided by each others' insights came to certain conclusions together. All this while using the medium of language. Being actively involved in the creating of meaning gave the students a sense of new experience and pleasure, because through the interactive investigation into the story, they no longer viewed it as something separate and autonomous which had little to do with their lives.

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INTERKULTURALNO ČITANJE KRATKE PRIČE “KINESKI JASTOG”
BRITANSKE SPISATELJICE A.S. BYATT

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