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Literature in the Language Classroom

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The paper presents a classroom project in which the author attempted to integrate visual and textual approach to a chapter from Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* in order to enrich language classroom activities.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to show an example of the practice of teaching language in the first through the third year of study at the Department of English of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb.

When I was a student, language teachers used literature as a source of »drilling« exercises. We were drilled to perfection. The only »literary« way we ever approached a text was comprehension questions. I remember that answering those was a rather tedious business, simply because we were expected to answer in the way the teacher would approve of. Now as a teacher of language I am always on the lookout for different and new approaches to working with literature in the classroom.

Many theorists agree that enjoyment plays an important factor in any learning process, and it is especially important in learning a language. As many students enjoy reading literature I see it as a potentially useful aid in the language classroom.

Collie and Slater list the following aims in *their* attempt to »diversify the repertoire of classroom activities« when involving literary texts in a language classroom. The aims of using literature would be:

- to maintain interest and involvement while using a variety of student-centred activities,
- to supplement the printed page,
- to tap the resources of knowledge and experience within the group,
- to help students explore their own responses to literature,
- to help students use the target language,
- to help integrate language and literature.

After having read Brumfit and Carter's work as well as Zambonini's *Imagine* I tried to construct a project. The topic of my report then is the presentation of a combination of the visual and the textual approach to a story found in the chapter entitled 'Shipwreck' from Julian Barnes' **A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters** and how I did it in the classroom.

The Project

In the classroom I started out by briefly introducing Julian Barnes and went on to say that together we were going to look at a chapter from his excellent book. It may not be a palatable experience at times. Then the students heard the beginning of a rather unpleasant story. The students heard the excerpt twice, first time to get their bearing and the second to jot down some details.

The story of a shipwreck

An expedition consisting of four vessels and 365 people set sail from a French island in the Mediterranean in June of 1816 for Senegal. They stopped in Tenerife to pick up supplies and continued south. Strong winds and ineptitude of the navigation officers scattered the vessels. The frigate passed Cape Blanco when it struck a reef rather close to the shore. There were not enough boats for everyone so it was

decided to build a raft which would be towed to the shore and all would be saved. The raft was supposed to carry 150 people, including one woman. Five boats were going to tow the raft. The raft was built, but when the order to abandon ship was given, chaos set in. The boats quickly abandoned the raft when they saw that all the people on the raft were standing in water to their waist. 17 persons remained on the ship. As the first night descended there was a storm. (Barnes 1989, p.115)

Now in groups of three the students read a card with WhoWhatWhereWhen questions to help them concentrate on the reading of several pages of the description of suffering on the raft after the shipwreck (Barnes 1989, 117–123). They then discussed answers and wrote their conclusions down on a paper provided. One of the students from each group would present their work to the whole class.

What's in the story?

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. What is the topic? | 6. Can you imagine what the ship looked like? |
| 2. Who are the protagonists? | 7. How do you see the raft in your mind's eye? |
| 3. Where did the accident happen? | 8. What did the survivors look like when they were saved? |
| 4. When? | 9. Why did the shipwreck take place? |
| 5. For how long did the unfortunate voyage on the raft go on? | |

All groups said the topic was a shipwreck, but some added more:

- »a shipwreck and a desperate struggle to survive«,
- »a shipwreck and people turning to animals«,
- »a shipwreck through which we as readers get an opportunity to learn some thing about human nature when confronted with a calamity«,
- »to what extent man is willing to go in order to survive«.

Most groups disagreed about the number of people involved in the shipwreck and those on the raft, on their nationality and colour and most students did not mention the presence of a woman on the raft.

Most groups disagreed about where the accident happened; some said it occurred in the Mediterranean. All groups knew the shipwreck took place in June 1816. There was wide disagreement about how long the voyage on the raft lasted.

When the students were told they could draw, a lot of them drew imaginative pictures of the ship and raft, however some said they could not imagine what the ship looked like.

The students gave vivid descriptions of the survivors that were saved:

- »in rags, soaking wet, sun-burned, weak, skinny, wounded, staggering, exhausted, hungry, bearded, delirious, smelly«,
- »We've never seen shipwrecked people, but probably: dirty, stinking, half-naked, with cracked skin (peeling), mad with happiness, drunk (we can assume because they drank wine and spirits all the time)«.

The majority of groups said that the accident took place because of a storm or strong wind or because of striking a reef, or even because of the ineptitude of sailors. Only a couple of groups said: ineptitude of the officers, ineptitude of the captain or as one group put it: »the navigation was lousy«.

After all groups presented their answers we spent some time discussing the difference in answers and why they occurred, describing the ship and the raft or looking at the drawings and admiring the details.

After this initial familiarisation with the text, the students were given the tools for their next task. Every group got a card with questions regarding an aspect of a formal analysis of the text that they had just read. Each group had the text in front of them and a card with the questions. The guided questions were taken from Zambonini's student handbook called *Imagine*. What the students were looking for was the author's intentions in using the **setting, figures of speech, vocabulary, sentences, nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs** in his text.

What kind of physical setting is used?

1. Identify the elements that compose the physical setting.
2. What connotations do they have?
3. Do they have anything in common?
4. What about the time in the story?
5. Why has the author decided to show time in progress?
6. Can you identify what the weather is like?
7. Why has the author decided to use this kind of weather?

What figures of speech are used?

1. What sound effects (alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, etc..) does the writer use, if any?
2. Why has the writer chosen to use these sound effects?
3. Does the writer repeat any words, phrases or sentences?
4. Can you find any examples of archaisms, personification, hyperbole, puns?
5. If there are, why do you think the writer has used them?
6. Has the writer used or invented any symbols? Why?
7. Can you see any similes in the text? Why are they there?
8. Can you see any metaphors? Why did the writer use them?

What kind of verbs are used?

1. What do the verbs refer to? Mental or emotional states? Actions or events? Which ones?
2. Has the author chosen to use transitive or intransitive verbs?
3. Is any verb repeated more than is usual?
4. Is it used in a strange way?
5. Has its meaning been changed?

What kind of nouns are used?

1. Abstract? Do they refer to events, perception, process, moral qualities, social qualities?
2. What proper names are used?
3. Are any collective nouns used?
4. Is any type of noun repeated more than usual?
5. Is it used in a strange way?
6. Has its meaning been changed?

What kind of sentences are used?

1. Look at the type of sentences the writer has used.
2. Are the sentences simple, compound or complex?
3. On average, how many words are there in a sentence?
4. What is the ratio of main clauses to co-ordinate and subordinate clauses?
5. Why has the writer structured his sentences in this way?
6. Is there a lot of difference in complexity from one sentence to another?
7. Does the author use a lot of adverbial, relative or clauses with gerunds and infinitives in them?

What kind of vocabulary is used?

1. How would you describe the vocab in general terms? Simple or complex? Formal or colloquial? Descriptive or evaluative? General or specific?
2. Does the writer use the words just to refer to concrete things or does he use emotive associations?
3. Has the writer used any idiomatic phrases?
4. What kind of dialect or register are they associated with?
5. Are any rare or specialised words used?
6. Are the meanings of words linked to one another?

After the students had discussed the answers and put their conclusions on a transparency, we had a plenary session at which one student presented the work of each group.

Their conclusions were very interesting but for reasons of brevity I will quote only some. The elements of the physical setting of a story are very important and the students identified them in the following way:

- »the »wideness« of the Atlantic Ocean, a big blue sky, sharks, seagulls, a wooden raft«,
- »wild sea at night, big waves, strong wind; calm sea and burning sun during the day.«

The connotations they have:

- »isolation, hopelessness, emptiness«,
- »the changes in weather are the changes of the survivors« mood from hope to desperation
- the elements of the setting help explain the state of mind that caused mutinies.«

The time in the story is the »tester of human endurance.« The author decided to show time in progress in order to emphasise the length and repetition of the men's suffering, the continuity of the struggle. He starts many paragraphs with »The next day...« or »The second night...«. The weather in the story was »stormy by night, with the rough sea, huge waves pouring over the raft, heavy rain, chilly, wet«. During the day the sea was calm, »it was sunny, the men sheltered under the cloth«. The author used this weather because he wanted '»to be trusted by the readers«, »to emphasise the suffering, to show how terrible the situation these people were in«.

The students managed to describe the basic tensions present in the setting: the small raft lost in the »open of the Atlantic Ocean«, and the repetitive flow of storms through the night coinciding with mutinies, versus the burning sun during the day with continuous draining of energy. The repetition of »the next day«, »the following night« emphasises the length and degree of suffering.

The tension present in the sentences was also noted and the students were able to see that the sentences Barnes used were »short at the beginning of the paragraphs and then got steadily longer until the next paragraph«. Often the last sentence of a paragraph was short. The short sentences were either simple or complex with only one subordinate clause, while the long ones were complex-compound. »The sentences had between 10 and 20 words and the ratio between the main and subordinate clauses was 1:5«. The reason Barnes did this is »to achieve suspense and prolong the effect, to emphasise the intense rhythm of events, to achieve the sense of high drama in his description«.

The students saw in the text that other tools that Barnes had used like verbs, nouns, vocabulary were also employed with the aim of achieving maximum drama and tension between the implacable nature and human folly, order and chaos, life and how easily death comes, day and night, irresponsibility/cowardice and moral courage, strength and weakness, officers and ordinary sailors. For example Barnes never once in 10 pages mentioned the name of the ship as throughout the story he called it the frigate. Indeed the name of the frigate is the last word of the story: the *Medusa* thus shockingly introducing the unfortunate name of the female monster. At once we remember that there was a woman on the ship.

After a lot of discussion we put on the board the conclusions we came up with in regards to all the tools employed by the author. At this point I told the students that Barnes' chapter entitled *Shipwreck* had two parts, the one they'd just read and the one which centred on a painting. I showed the students the painting done by the French painter Gericault. The three-hour session ends after they take a good look at the painting.

THE PAINTING (see end of text)

When we meet again newly-formed groups look at the painting and answer questions which are designed as tools in the analysis of visual images. The groups look closely at the elements of the painting and their task is to find out why the painter used the setting, colours, lines and shapes that he did in his picture. After they had discussed their answers they wrote them down on transparencies and presented their conclusions to the class.

The setting in a visual image

1. What is the figure and what the ground?
2. Identify the elements that compose the physical setting.
3. What connotations do they have?
4. Why has the artist chosen to use this physical setting?
5. At what time is the image set?
6. What connotations does it have?
7. Why has the artist chosen to set his image at this time?
8. What is the weather like?
9. Why this weather?

Colours in a visual image?

1. Identify the colours that the artist has used in this image.
2. What connotations do they have? Are they happy or sad? Warm or cool?
3. What symbolic meaning do the colours have?
4. Why these colours?
5. Where does the light come from? Above, below, front, back, side?
6. What effect does this produce on the viewer?
7. Why has the artist chosen this light?

The lines in a visual image

1. Divide the image up according to the type of lines that have been used. What are they? Straight, curved, broken, solid?
2. Has the artist used different types of line in the same image?
3. Are the lines thick or thin?
4. Are they organic or geometric? Rectilinear or curvilinear?
5. Has the artist used lines to give a 3-D effect? How?
6. If there are people in the image, where are they looking? What are their lines of sight?

The shapes in a visual image

1. What two-dimensional shapes has the visual artist used in his image?
2. What connotations do they have?
3. Are they rectilinear or curvilinear?
4. What three-dimensional shapes has the visual artist used in his image?
5. Are they rectilinear or curvilinear? Geometric or organic?
6. Why has the artist decided to use these shapes?

The students decided that the figure in the setting is »the men (human beings) on the raft and the ground is the raft surrounded by the sea and the sky«. The elements that compose the physical setting are »the raft, the bodies, the sail, the sheets under which the men hid from the sun, the barrels, the ropes, the rocky sea, the dark stormy sky, the wind«. The connotations are »danger, drama, threat, fear, suffering, pain, despair, hopelessness'. The artist has chosen to use this setting »to illustrate the men's suffering more vividly, more dynamically; to convey the feelings and the emotional state of survivors«. The image is set at dawn said many, others claimed it was sunset. The ones said the connotation of dawn was hope' awakened by the appearance of a ship' and they also noticed the fear that the ship might not notice the raft, while the others noted that sunset has the meaning of 'doubt whether they would be alive the next morning; the day is coming to its end and therefore their hope diminishes and the coming night intensifies the men's 'fear as well as the viewers' feeling for drama'.

The weather is 'dark and stormy but there is a lot of yellow colour implying dawn or sunset'. The »dawners« said 'the clouds are slowly disappearing while the saviour ship is approaching. The coming of the sun and disappearing clouds symbolise the coming of salvation'. The »sunsetters« said 'the weather is provoking strong feelings, fills the viewers with dread and therefore has a stronger effect'. Also 'stormy weather is the perfect setting to present the drama of a mass of human beings'.

The group that analysed colours said that 'colours are generally very dark, except for the intensely yellow of the light from above, which made its way through the dark, stormy clouds. Brown and yellow are contrasted. They are both sad and cool, but yellow is much livelier, more vivid and represents hope for those who are still alive. There is also a wide range of nuances between brown and yellow (orange, black, white, greenish-brown) which creates a kind of a desperate atmosphere, like in hell. The viewer has the feeling that the brown colour in the painting stands for death, and the yellow for hope and life, toward which the majority of the shipwrecked are reaching. The artist has chosen this light because the meaning can be understood ambiguously: 'hope and at the same time despair.'

Once we heard all groups and discussed their findings we came to the following conclusions:

1. Both the writer and the painter used the means at their disposal in order to convey to us the sense of drama involved in (150 people from the Medusa being shipwrecked off the coast of western Sahara and only 15 of them surviving after 15 days spent on the raft) the shipwreck.

2. The writer used the specific setting, figures of speech, vocabulary, sentences, nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to express the flow of events leading up to the shipwreck and those events on the raft which left only 15 survivors.

3. The painter chose the specific setting, colours, lines and shapes to express his sense of the extreme tensions present in the story. The students readily perceived that what lay behind the painter's tools with which he achieved the tension inherent in the story was the larger issues of human existence: being torn between despair and hope, strength and weakness, beauty and brutality of nature (and humans as part of nature), life and death, light and dark, good and evil. However that the more gruesome details of what happened on the raft were not shown by the painter and were left to the viewer to either know about them or not.

4. The writer carefully chose which information he would give us, stressing more the flow of time spent on the raft, the exchange of hope and despair and not cringing from depiction of cannibalism and also planting details like the responsibility of incapable officers (perhaps even the captain) for the disaster and death of a cabin boy at the beginning of the voyage.

Now we look at Barnes' other half of the chapter in which he discussed how Gericault came to portray just this scene and not any other of the numerous possibilities. We found out that Gericault did not paint the Medusa striking the reef because the topic would have been political (incompetence and corruption of the Royalist Navy). He did not draw the moment when the tow-ropes were cast off and the raft abandoned nor did he paint the mutinies in the night, perhaps they would have been too theatrical. He chose not to paint the necessary cannibalism for it would have been too shocking. After discussion of why Gericault did not paint certain events which happened on the raft, the students were given a copy of Barnes' conclusion to the analysis of the painting:

What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor. This is no longer 'Scene of Shipwreck', let alone 'The Raft of the Medusa'. We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine; we don't just become the sufferers. They become us. And the picture's secret lies in the pattern of its energy. Look at it one more time: at the violent waterspout building up through those muscular backs as they reach for the speck of the rescuing vessel. All that straining – to what end? There is no formal response to the painting's main surge, just as there is no response to most human feelings. Not merely hope, but any burdensome yearning: ambition, hatred, love (especially love) – how rarely do our emotions meet the object they seem to deserve? How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us. Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for. (Barnes 1989, p.137)

And with this we finished the project. In terms of aims for using literature in the classroom set at the beginning of the paper it seemed that:

1. The students were interested and involved in their work and that the teacher was on the organising and monitoring side of events but that the students themselves came up with the most important conclusions. Each group of students was working on and analysing a different aspect of the text which meant they were reporting back to the class results of their genuine re-search.

2. They not only discussed problems in groups but also as a whole class. They also drew on transparencies and paper and talked about their drawings. They looked at and analysed a painting.

3. The resources of knowledge and experience within the group was relied on the whole time. (Some students remembered the name of the ship before it was ever mentioned, remembered other instances of cannibalism they had heard about, etc.)

4. There were no wrong answers, some students saw this aspect of the text, some that. Together we all learned how to recognise which tools the writer and the painter used and why, thus also giving the students the tools for »exploring their own responses to literature.«

5. They used English in an imaginative way in a new situation which required their involvement and opinion.

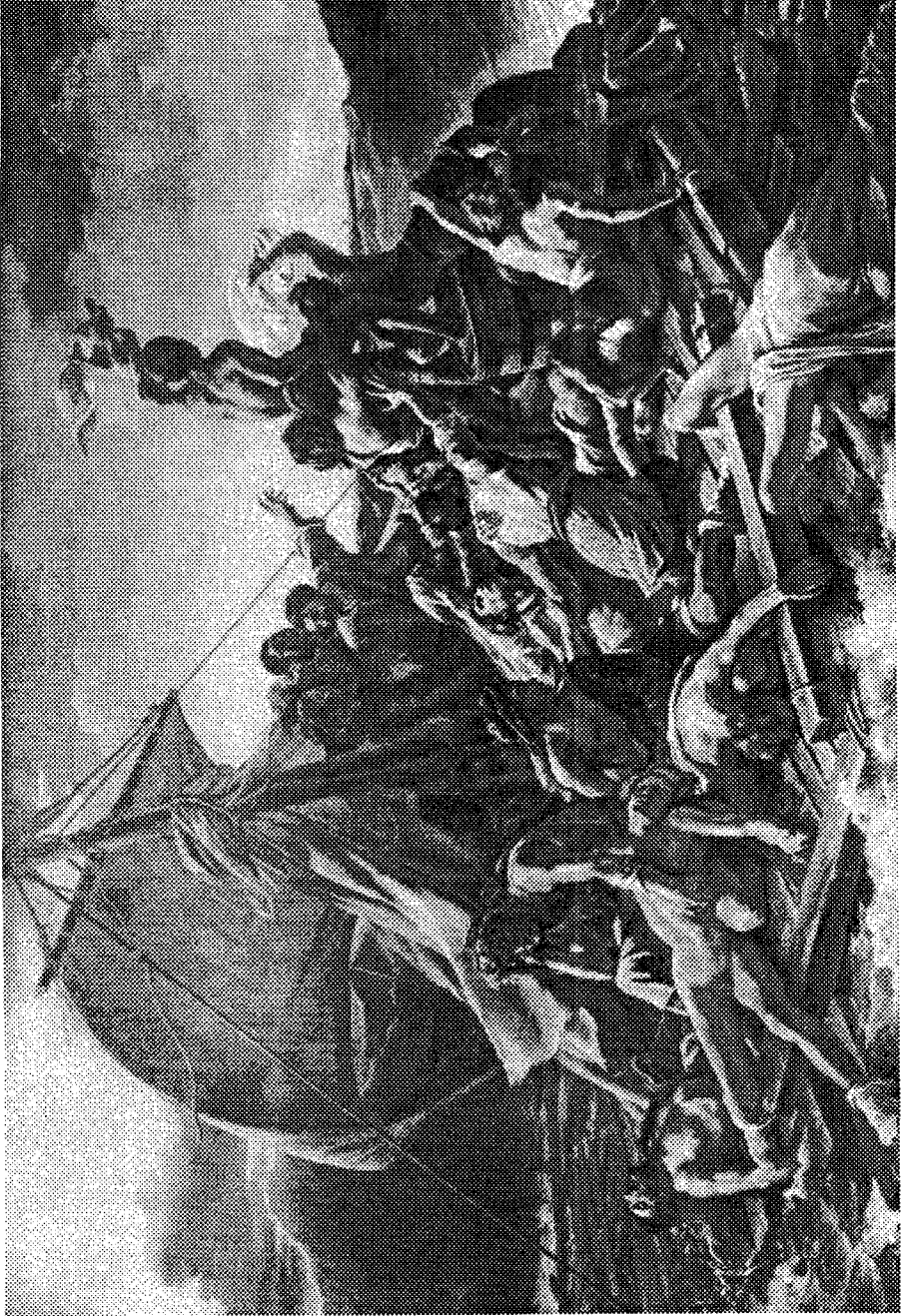
6. The students were also able to integrate what sometimes was unpalatable language with what was a very artistic way of presenting the larger issues the artists were concerned with in their works.

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KNJIŽEVNOST U JEZIČNOJ UČIONICI

Članak prezentira mini-projekt rada sa studentima engleskog jezika treće godine na jezičnim vježbama u kojem je autorica pokušala integrirati vizuelni i tekstualni pristup jednom poglavlju iz »Povijest svijeta u 10 1/2 poglavlja« Juliana Barnesa s namjerom da obogati jezičnu nastavu u učionici.



Th. GÉRICAULT, *Brodolomci s fregate Meduza*