

EXPLORING LITERATURE THROUGH LANGUAGE: MEDIEVAL TEXTS IN TEFL

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the teaching of a medieval literary text as self-contained, authentic, intrinsically motivating the language material, which can extend experience and encourage the use of language. As literature is also language, the chosen literary text will show that there are many productive ways in which literature and language can reinforce each other. Therefore, language and literature cannot, and should not be mutually exclusive domains.

Key-words: literature, methods, teaching

The approaches to the class-sharing of Thomas Malory's medieval text: *The Death of King Arthur*, (Part Eight, Chapter 4: The Day of Destiny, pp.146-149) are designed to reflect the purpose and nature of teaching literature in the shared context of the class-reader. They concentrate on the forms of response and interaction with the text that are characteristically different from forms that a reader might use in tackling a text privately. The overall purpose is to bring the reader into active participation with the text, and to promote the text as a rich and vital source of meaning, which can be related to the needs, interests, purposes and motivations of the group as developing individual and social beings.

The approaches are framed in such a way as to recognise the levels at which this fictional text operates to aid groups of readers in becoming aware of these levels, while accepting that in a mixed ability class there will be different degrees of appreciation and understanding: *aspects of structure, symbolic aspects, aspects of style*. being aware of the 'crafting', particularly the structuring of the book, selection of literary devices and vocabulary, use of syntactic conventions, developing a critical awareness of the relationship between form and content.

I'd like to stress that the approaches which follow should be seen as suggestions complementing other forms of reading activity, including students' independent reading and structured classroom discussion.

Teaching Unit: The Death of King Arthur, fragment taken from Thomas Malory, *The Morte Darthur*, (part eight, chapter 4: The Day of Destiny, pages 146-149):

Teaching Unit comprises: Aspects of Structure, Symbolic Aspects, Aspects of Style, as I have already mentioned above.

Aspects of Structure. At this level, the readers must be aware of the story, particularly how it is sequenced, and to be able to follow the text at the level of its story.

Activities suggested:

1. Translate the text into Romanian. List down the unknown words and look them up.
2. You might have noticed the archaic vocabulary and grammar forms in the text. Replace them with modern English equivalents.
3. Explain in your own words:
 - a. "Your commandment shall be done". (see line: 6); b. "I saw nothing but waves and winds". (15); c. "I saw nothing but waters wap and waves wan". (24); d. "But now go again lightly". (28); e. "I dread me I have tarried over long". (40,41); f. "... in me is no trust for me to trust in". (57)
4. Then turn the text into the Indirect Speech.
5. Compress the text into a number of sequences and write a summary of it. You may do it by filling the blanks in the following:
 - a. King Arthur asked Sir Bedivere ...; b. Sir Bedivere said that ... but he thought ... ;
 - c. Arthur wanted to know what ...; d. He realized Sir Bedivere ... asked him again;
 - e. When the sword was thrown ...; f. Sir Bedivere took the King ...; g. The fair ladies and their Queen ...; h. Arthur said to Sir Bedivere that he ...; i. Sir Bedivere discovered Arthur's ... and ... for the rest of his life.
6. Describe the setting, i.e. the time and place within which the scene is enacted. Consider carefully section (33-41).
7. Imagine yourself as Sir Bedivere or King Arthur and describe your actions and thoughts in two paragraphs.
8. Consider 41-46 carefully. Write down the thoughts that may have crossed Sir Bedivere's mind.
9. Imagine a story about the fair ladies in the barge and write it. You may use either the First Person Narrative or the Omniscient Point of View.

10. King Arthur is the main character of this book. Detail his part in this section. Represent temporal relationships between events, places, characters, etc., as a linear sequence. Draw attention to sequencing and structure. Establish cause and effect relationships.
11. Find references in Arthur's speech to past moments and actions which prove that he had been highly thought of by the Knights of the Round Table. See lines: 40,47,56-59.
12. What do you learn about the character of Arthur from Sir Bedivere's last decision, words and attitude? See lines: 75-76, 78-80.

Symbolic Aspects. At this level, the readers must be aware of what the story stands for, the universal meanings, and circumstances illustrated by the particular narrative; they must be aware of the metaphors and imagery used in the construction of the narrative and the descriptive passages.

Activities suggested:

1. The commandment section show how ritual plays an important part in the text. See lines: 9-38. Select from this passage the lines that best reveal Bedivere's thoughts and actions. Follow the outline:
 - a. Bedivere pretends that he has done what Arthur asked him to do. See lines:15,24;
 - b. He thinks that by hiding the sword and lying to Arthur he can keep the sword. See lines: 9-10;
 - c. Arthur refers to him as, "traitor unto me and untrue", and says, "now hast you betrayed me twice!" See lines: 25-32.
2. What do you learn about the character of Sir Bedivere from this passage? Write one paragraph about him in a form of a documentary.
3. Consider section 39-80 carefully; a. How many people are present in the scene? b.Can you describe them? Try to draw the group in lines: 47-49.
4. Make sure of good understanding of the relationship between the characters and their implication in the scene. How many people are there? How many women? How many men? See lines: 6,48,67.
5. What do we learn about Sir Bedivere's feelings for King Arthur? See lines: 61-62; 76; 78-80.
6. Comment on King Arthur's attitude in the concluding section. See lines: 56-59.
7. Comment on the title of the novel in terms of its relevance to: a. the plot of the novel; b. the theme of the novel; c. the author's attitude to his hero.

8. Does the kind of society that Thomas Malory describes bear any relation to the realities in his country? Turn the text into contemporary prose. You may try and write a newspaper article on it.

Aspects of Style. At this level, the readers must be aware of the ‘crafting’, particularly the structuring of the book, selection of literary devices and vocabulary, use of syntactic conventions; developing a critical awareness of the relationship between form and content.

Activities suggested:

1. You must have noticed that most of the text is written in dialogue form that catches the rhythms of the human speaking voice. Comment on the stylistic advantages of the dialogue in terms of: a.verisimilitude; b.dynamism; c. character drawing. Create “interior speech” for each character at critical moments and/or in crucial passages of dialogue. Contrast inner dialogue (what is thought) with outer dialogue (what is said). This activity encourages reflective awareness of characters’ feelings and thoughts; recognise characters relationships with others; bring readers into closer, more active participation with events and characters; encourage their insights into characters.

2. Here we have highly elaborate complex sentences, tension creating techniques, a wide range of imagery from visual to auditory and kinesthetic (i.e., sensory experience derived by bodily movements and tensions). The whole scene represents a point of high dramatic tension in the structure of the story. See lines: 42-46. You can work as if illustrators to discuss and/or execute illustrations of the text, jacket covers. Try to match the form of the illustration to the sense of the text. In groups, you can also compose and perform sounds to accompany a sequence of action and/or to establish a sense of place. The activity emphasises the descriptive imagery, match non-verbal form to the sense of the text; develops the sense of “atmosphere” and the “environment” in the text.

3. Note the structure of the excerpt and try to divide it into logical units as follows: a. Arthur’s wish (1-5); b. Bedivere’s act of treason (6-24); c. The reaction of Arthur (25-32); d. Desire fulfilled (33-38); e. Arthur’s departure (34-59); f. Bedivere’s sorrow (60-68); g. Bedivere’s new life (68-80).

4. Compare Section ‘a’ to Section ‘d’ above, and comment on the change in Sir Bedivere’s attitude. You should remark the archaic use of the verbal forms with the ending *st* for the second person and the ceremonious way of addressing. See lines: 1-5; 33-38.

5. Look for key words and phrases such as: sword (2), waters (24), barge (44), pray for my soul (59). Discuss how they help to build up a new attitude towards Arthur’s wish. Write a paragraph on Bedivere’s disobedience towards Arthur. Try to become actively

involved with the people and events in the text. Demonstrate comprehension of aspects of characters. Comment on Bedivere's disobedience as a reader but from viewpoint of characters.

6. Examine carefully Thomas Malory's text from the point of view of realistic setting, ritual and legend. See lines: 7-14; 33-38; 42-46. a. See how Bedivere's disobedience leads to ritualistic situations (33-38); b. Comment on the way this makes Sir Bedivere believe magic and its power; c. The word *sword* is obviously a key one in the stylistic fabric of Arthur's speech. See how often the word occurs and how it acquires greater significance. In myth and legend, the weapon with which the hero fights is an image of his own, symbolizing his force and character. Arthur's sword comes from the mysterious land of the fantastic, from the lake, this great unconscious power. It is a magic sword; Arthur, feeling that he is going to pass away, wants to return the sword to the Lady of the Lake. Write a comment on it. d. In the same way, the intensive plural *waters* is a key word. Comment upon its relationship to the scene related: 'Water as a magic surface and a bridge between this world and the Otherworld'.

7. Analyse the language employed by Arthur and Sir Bedivere.

a. Arthur addresses Sir Bedivere in terms of great politeness and sincerity because he has been a reliable knight to him. b. Sir Bedivere speaks very kindly using a most ceremonious language. c. Finding out that he had been lied to, Arthur addressed angrily to Sir Bedivere. d. After Sir Bedivere had fulfilled Arthur's wish, the King spoke politely to him again. e. They take leave and both look very unhappy.

8. Comment on the statement: "Comfort thyself and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in", (lines 56-57) in terms of textual evidence.

9. The last chapter in which Arthur passes away by going into the barge with many fair ladies making for the Avalon, reveals Thomas Malory's unsurpassed art of resorting to symbolic imagery in order to create an atmosphere of highly poetic sensitiveness. Sir Bedivere could not believe that his king would die so soon until he saw the barge on the lake. (44). a. You should notice that the characters first become aware of this world surroundings; than of the water, standing for the bridge between the worlds and finally, the spiritual world embodied in the hermit and his hermitage. b. How does the lake suggest the implacability of the indomitable fate? Find a section in the text relevant in this respect. See lines: 42-62. Write your comment on it. c. How does color suggest the idea of a ritualistic death in which the fair ladies, the nature, the lake, the barge were sharing the task of capturing Arthur? d. How is the impressiveness of the moment enhanced by the suggestion of sadness of the fair ladies? Comment on the graphical image suggested by the sonorous and visual imagery contained in

lines 42-49. e. It is against that universal ominous motionlessness that Sir Bedivere becomes aware of the ladies' intention and of the significance of the little barge. Find evidence in the text of Thomas Malory's mastery of the art of gradation. See lines: 42-49.

10. Pick out lexical elements that contribute to create a mournful atmosphere. See lines: 43-46. a. Notice how the scene is expanded by the presence of many fair ladies. Who are they? Who is their queen? Where do they come from? What is your reaction to the epithet *black* describing the ladies' hoods? b. Find evidence in the text to sustain the mournful atmosphere. See lines: 45-46; 66; 73-76. Make a list of verbs and nouns suggesting sadness and mourning. c. Notice the cumulative repetition of the word *waters* and write down your response to this image. d. Comment on the effect of Sir Bedivere's words. See lines:78-80. e. Pick out words connected to the Otherworld and to the spiritual world.

11. Make up a paragraph detailing the three realms where action takes place in this fragment: 1. the real world; 2. the lake which is the link between the real world and Avalon, the Celtic paradise; 3. the spiritual world represented by the hermit and his hermitage, the chapel, the grave.

12. If we define a *literary symbol* as a word or phrase that has a range of reference beyond itself, would you agree that *waters* has acquired the status of a symbol in the text? If you do, give instances to support this statement. Do you consider *waters*: a. the bridge between our world and the Otherworld?; the image of any beginning and any ending of life and death? Myths say that leaving this world our souls travel by sea towards the realm of shadows. b. you can think of it as the symbol of life, of feminine instability, as water and its waves are opposed to rock, the symbol of stability, of yang, the Chinese masculine principle. c. It can be the symbol of human soul with its passions and sins. d. It means coming back to nature to what is womanhood; it means returning to genuine sources of happiness and safety. e. With Carl Gustav Jung *water* is the symbol of the unconscious, with all its traps: mermaids and their tempting songs. f. It is one of the four essential elements out of which the universe was created in keeping with cosmogonical myths; it is a universal link, and at the same time an element which separates and destroys everything.

13. Thomas Malory builds up his three realms with an unsurpassed ability in the art of gradation. In (3) the key descriptive element is cumulated and it is in the very middle of this symbol, 'water', that we saw Excalibur disappearing and King Arthur passing away to Avalon. See lines: 36-38; 43.

14. Notice the change from the descriptive to the tragic. See lines: 60-80; the author reaches the climax of the tragedy in the concluding paragraph.

15. The Point of View or Narrative Technique establishes the relation between the author and the narrator in narrative prose;

a. Who is the narrator in this section of the book? b. Is he a participant in or an observer of the scene? c. Can you distinguish the *reporting* sequences from the *commenting* ones? d. Is there a clear cut distinction between the two?

16. Behind the narrative there is always the author's *Moral Point of View*, i.e., his personal statement on life's major problems which he makes by writing his work. Such a statement involves a moral judgment and a writer is estimated by.

a. What is Thomas Malory's moral point of view as expressed in the fragment? b. What is your estimation of it?

17. Now gather all your information and impressions on the fragment and write an essay on *Thomas Malory's Art of Creating an Atmosphere* in this excerpt from *The Morte Darthur*; or you can write a paragraph on *The Quest of the Self in Avalon*; or a composition which can begin like this: *The Healing of the King's Wound Stands for the Spiritual Healing of His Kingdom.*

To sum up, we should say that the pleasure and enjoyment in reading literature come from interpreting the literary text in relation to the readers' knowledge of the world they live in. The advantage of studying literature is justified by the fact that it represents a tool for the acquisition of new vocabulary, so it offers the readers the opportunity of getting informed by themselves. Teaching literature also implies the acquisition of competence in the area of figurative language in all its aspects: metaphor, idiom, semantic extension. It is obvious that intensive work on the figurative use of the language and metaphor is tackled through the presentation of literary texts.

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