

Literature Makes Better Farmers

Occasionally I ask teachers if they work in a linear or a non-linear way. The look I usually get is, predictably, fairly non-committal; blank even. If I ask them, on the other hand, if, as teachers, they think of themselves as akin to industrialists or akin to farmers they usually have no hesitation in saying 'farmers'. Presumably they are thinking of the nurturing rather than manufacturing element of their chosen profession. Indeed, it would be a hard-nosed teacher who claimed to be an avid industrialist, working in the linear way of measuring input to a product and being able to assess the output in direct relationship and cost effectiveness of that input. The hard-working farmer, battling the unpredictable elements, knows the input but also knows that the output is unpredictable, dependant on a variety of factors, few of which are easy to control. The farmer's work is non-linear. Quite rightly, teachers identify with this scenario, and can tick off the unpredictable elements, unforeseen and accidental collections of ungovernable catalysts which can occur in the classroom, with ease. However, when I then ask teachers to account for the seemingly linear demands of the syllabus and the testing system, they can look quite nonplussed for a moment or two. Perhaps the answer is that the teacher, like the farmer, has to plug into the commercial market and take their produce to the market place.

A further extension of this model for explaining this dynamic of teaching was introduced to me by my colleague Joseph Guerra, who is busily developing an exciting appraisal of the language teaching classroom by proposing social action scenarios, with all the thrusts and parries of Clausewitz and Max Weber's visions of what makes a society tick. According to Guerra, reducing the societal model to the language classroom leaves us with three principal players on the stage or, more likely, in the room. These are the teacher, the student (as individuals and as a collective body) and the language. In an ideal state, these three elements have an equal effect (regardless of status) on each other and they provide the flux and friction that causes our non-linear model of social action to occur. However, in the real world – which is where most of us have to work – there are a number of restraining factors that mean that the flow or fluidity of the interaction between the three elements simply doesn't happen in an 'ideal' way which in turn means that neither students nor teachers feel their roles as being mutually equal ones. Guerra identifies five restraining factors: **feedback, friction, fluidity, framework** and **fellow students**. I'll return to these a little later, but for now it might be agreed that 'framework' can be seen as a particularly influential element especially if one considers it contains the elements of syllabus and testing, which modify the expectations and behaviour of both teachers and students.

Creative Readers

Literature can help to redress the balance of overly 'linear' forms of influence, and allow us to become better farmers. "No two people read the same book" said American author Edmund Wilson and this is the perfect introduction to a series of pre-reading activities that share this precept, with its implication that we, as readers, contribute a considerable amount to what is being read, that we are not simply passive recipients of the author's intent; we react and interact with the author's ideas, adding our own and providing colour from our own personal palette. One of my favourite pre-reading activities is one which causes initial surprise, where the student is asked to answer a series of micro questions about the characters and events contained in a story that they *have never read*. Surprise and, sometimes, a certain huffiness are soon dispelled when students start to

construct viable (and usually hugely enjoyable) stories based on the skeleton that the questions provide, the flesh being provided by their own experiences and memories and, without doubt, a whole range of stories unique to them. It is rare for the stories created in this way - in one room by small groups - to be duplicated, even though the skeleton and the potential for similar experiences to play a role are all around; it is unknown – at least in my experience – for the stories created to be the same as that produced by the original author. But isn't that heart of stories? All those experiences; all those possible paths to take; which one is being trod, and by whom?

The neat thing is that all the stories created in the classroom by this device have their own validity and their own truth. As a teacher you will suddenly find yourself steering a strange course through unfamiliar territory where student's answers, if given honestly, cannot be wrong and where opinions and insights have equal validity regardless of linguistic or story-telling abilities.

At this point we can see that the usual view of a favoured relationship between teacher and language, one which seems normally to disfavour the student, can be redressed and replaced by a far more balanced relationship without dislocating respect or natural authority. We need to be clear about what has happened here: the triangular relationship of teacher/student/language has been replaced with the teacher/student/literature model. Literature in this case is a language tool, not an academic literary tool. The relationship the student has primarily is with the text or story, the language being merely a means to access it. The teacher has an equal relationship to the text, even though their perception of the language medium will be different. It should be clear, then, that literature as a language learning tool is a powerful aid in the quest for greater non-linearity in our classroom. Literature can help us to be better teachers.

Let me come back briefly to Guerra's five 'F's. In terms of literature, and given the model seen above, we might consider that they pan out like this: **feedback** comes from the students/readers experiences triggered by the literary text; **friction** is modified and eased by the uniqueness and validity of experiences within the given context; **fluidity** is a component supplied by the flow of argument and counter-argument about a literary text; **frame-work** is supplied by the temporal limit of a literary text and its components as well as by the demands to 'understand' the text; **fellow students/readers** are on an equal level of experience, even if their individual abilities to talk about their experiences may be different; everyone has 'ownership' of the story.

Establishing a programme

The BritLit project, now in its third year, was built on the premise of cooperative partnership from the outset, and the way that the materials have been developed presupposes the role of the student as a **reader**, someone whose views on the text demand an equal voice. Ironically, this attempt to produce materials to assist in the non-linear classroom started from a linear challenge – the extensive reading list for years 10-12 in the Portuguese state education system. Literature, in the form of short stories, is a compulsory element of language learning for these years and as such seems to have been treated as more of a drudge than a joy. Our intention was to help change that, making materials attractive enough to lure teachers into "our" stories and thereby into a way of teaching that included the readers, a.k.a. students, as partners in that process. The partnership that was established from the outset was between APPI (the Portuguese teachers' association) and British Council, Portugal. This partnership of

equals helped to determine the content as well as the style of the materials, with British and Portuguese culture and knowledge being partnered, paired and compared. This in itself led to a degree of non-linearity in our relationship, and we went in some fairly unexpected directions for the first few months. This non-linearity of approach has meant that the project has also been very successful in coping with sudden change or shifting demands and priorities, something that a more linear, fixed-end-result, model would find harder to achieve.

The extended reading list is an advisory rather than an obligatory list of titles, but few teachers seem to see it that way, and many keep slavishly to the list. Indeed, many keep slavishly to the same short story year in, year out. BritLit decided to work with some of the texts from the reading list, but also started to add some of its own choosing. The choice of texts, as well as the early classroom material, was decided by a small 'panel' of 25 Portuguese teachers, suggested by APPI, with British Council acting as a linking agent, as well as an occasional *agent provocateur*. Drafts and ideas were put up for appraisal and modified, replaced or applauded at informal 'focus' group meetings in different parts of the country, the original 'panel' growing by word of mouth from 25 to over 200 in the first year. A healthily organic way to develop an idea, surely

There were a few self-imposed rules – the short stories had to be British and contemporary (British Council influence) and had to relate to multiple aspects of the syllabus (APPI influence) – and these can now be added to '**framework**' in Guerra's five 'F's. By the beginning of the 2004/5 academic year, just 18 months after the official launch of the project, ten 'kits' or resource packs were available for use, based mainly on short stories, but also on a fragment of a novel as well as a group of poems.

A pattern soon emerged. First, we decided, what we produced should not be perceived as a "course". Rather, we needed to respond effectively to two tricky issues which would make such an approach problematic: English language classes in year 10 in Portuguese schools tend to be of mixed ability; we had no way of knowing how much time each individual teacher would be able to devote to this part of the syllabus – such decisions were made, in advance, by each teaching team in each school. This meant that all the materials we produced had to be flexible in a number of ways. No single worksheet or project could be dependant upon any other; they all had to be free-standing. Secondly, we wanted to increase the impact of the first reading of the story so that it was not a trial but something that the student had a genuine reason to do, and so pre-reading activities had to play a major role. Thirdly, we wanted to link the text to broad cultural issues that students could relate to both within the story and within their own experiences. Fourthly, we knew we had to meet the demand of linearity created by the rest of the syllabus and by the testing system by focusing also on lexical and language features that occurred naturally within the story. Finally, we wanted to create a clear wrapping-up session or event, for the teacher to bring the activity or the project to an end, but at the same time we wanted to open the way to new experiences and other, related paths through further reading of texts that had something in common with the work recently completed. We didn't want the reading experience simply to be snuffed out.

We also needed:

- to produce materials that were 'reader friendly', especially knowing that many of the set texts were linguistically challenging
- to acknowledge that other texts presented cultural challenges, especially those in specifically British settings – for example, references to pantomimes, Welsh

- customs or backdrops of particular English towns – and to recognise that readers will benefit from some assistance.
- not to attempt to analyse or dissect the literary structure or value of the text, rather allowing it simply to be a tale worth telling while giving access to cultural and linguistic experience and learning.

Therefore, we have attempted to provide the readers with a series of stepping stones to the texts, with pre-reading exercise that concentrate on introducing the characters and the settings, through dialogue and other quotes from the text, which themselves provide an introduction to the language used. The consequence is that by the time the readers get to read the complete text, there are already a sufficient number of familiar passages to make the journey through the story largely without tears.

Developing Context

What is more we also had to cope with a number of unknowns, including the reality of highly mixed ability classes, and not knowing how much time – half an hour or half a semester – each teacher would be able to devote to the project, or what the horribly linear pulls of syllabus or course book would be. It seemed important, therefore, that we produced a series of materials that could be used completely independently of each other, providing as much flexibility as possible. Hence, reference to Grandfather Griffith's hatred of technology in Eric Malpass' story 'The Return of the Moonman' led to an explanation of Luddites, old and new, alternative technology provision in Wales and some pithy little articles from the European Space Agency, while the spooky tale of Roald Dahl's 'The Landlady' leads us to information on real-life witches, how to embalm a body, and famous English poisoners. All the project work and worksheets produced are sourced, in that they are headed by quotes from the tale highlighting the relevance of this contextual exploration.

This, then, still manages to leave reading the story itself within the far more private, individual realm of the reader – where it properly belongs – a reflective, subjective activity which does not attempt to challenge the reader's honest interpretation. Indeed, whenever direct response to a question of interpretation becomes inevitable, the format used always leaves the answers to questions open-ended and debatable, with right/wrong answers being avoided. In the end we hope to have provided a heightened possibility of fluidity, an adapted framework and new, positive friction within the classroom, thereby supporting non-linear activity.

The four main sections of the kits – so called because teachers have to build their own lessons from the materials provided – are the 'characterisation' and 'context' outlined above, plus 'word work', which explores the language used in the text in a more formal way, and 'after reading', which brings the activity to a close, while also pointing ahead to new, contemporary literature which is thematically linked.

Another element of the project is to bring writers – authors and poets (the kits use poetry extensively) – to work with teachers and students, either *in situ* or on-line. The effect of this new input can have an electrifying effect on both teachers and students, and it is interesting to reflect on what will have happened to the classroom dynamic by introducing a fourth element, the writer. Does the author take the place of the teacher, or the place of the language/literature? Perhaps what happens is a series of perception shifts, for the students might regard the author temporarily as the teacher, while for the teacher the author becomes the language and for the author the teacher becomes a

student. (Occasionally we witness resistance by teachers to the introduction of an author into their class; I suspect that it is this threat to the traditional role that is part of this resistance). Or, let us take the case of a group of students who were working on a short story by an author who they knew would shortly be visiting their school. With help (but not direction) from their teacher, they transformed this story into a little play, which they then performed for the author when he visited, and before they interviewed him about his work. The author, inspired by the work of the students, went on to write a new story, about the place where the students came from. In this case all the elements were able to transform status, and everyone had the chance to be a student, everyone became a teacher and everyone became an author; everyone in the project gave something and gained something. A real win-win situation.

Of course, the arguments against this approach – as beneficial as it is – are legion, and frequently deafening. The loudest arguments are: “But what about the syllabus?” “What about the course book?” “We haven’t got time!”. Well, fine. If teaching English means completing the course book and ticking all the boxes in the syllabus check-list, then this is your only option. If, on the other hand, teaching English is about making the language alive and meaningful, where students can even gain ownership of the language, then perhaps teachers should consider missing out pages 54 – 61 of the course book and introduce a bit of live literature instead.

Of course, there’s a danger. They’ll be increasing the chances of non-linearity coming into the classroom, and who knows where that might lead?

Fitch O’Connell
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