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READING: BETWEEN DECODING AND CREATING TEXT

Abstract

Introduction. *The literature on reading theory and research has underlined that reading is a threefold relationship: it involves both what the reader brings to the text and how the reader interacts with the text, as well as the text itself. A questionnaire about reading literature devised to gauge the current language students' appetite for reading showed surprising results: a mixed picture of the literature classes and widespread student demotivation.*

Aim of the study. *The paper tries to pin down the causes of student dissatisfaction and suggests an alternative strategy.*

Materials and methods. *A questionnaire made up of 30 questions referring to the process of reading done in or for the literature classes was administered to more than one hundred third-year students of the Faculty of Letters. Some of the 85 valid answers received are analysed, which address the reactions of the students to the literature classes.*

Results. *Some reading classes are memorable as they involve minds and emotions, creation and re-creation. However, other classes in which teaching reading is done traditionally, following a one-way transmission model, result in demotivation.*

Conclusions. *The students are demotivated by the denial of their reader independence, critical thinking and creativity. A strategy which promotes student independence by combining reading and writing, critical thinking and creativity is suggested.*

Key words: *reading process, readers as text interpreters and makers, integration of reading and writing.*

INTRODUCTION

The literature in reading theory and research (Barnett, 1989; Carrell, Devine, and Eskey, 1988; Grabe, 1991; Wallace, 1988) has underlined the importance of recognising that reading has as much to do with (a) what the reader brings to the text, (b) how the reader interacts with the text, as well as (c) the text itself. Both reading and writing are purposeful and active skills: evolving, recursive, dialogic, tentative, fluid, exploratory, involving meaning-making. Moreover, the heuristic nature of writing allows one to discover and consider one's stance, one's interpretation, and one's

¹ Idem.

immediate reactions to a text. It also makes the reader's responses to a text overt, concrete, and tangible, making the students aware of their own reactions to the text.

However, by tradition, the writing introduced in the literature programmes (often in the form of essay writing or answering to questions), is viewed as either reinforcing reading or simply taking away from reading time. When written assignments are required by the reading textbooks, they invariably appear at the end of the units. This stresses the notion that writing is done as a final activity after the text has been read, analysed, worked through. Reading is thus viewed as providing first, comprehensible input, second, a model for the students' subsequent written texts, and third, a subject matter to write about. This view imposes a static, unidirectional effect of reading on writing. Reading and writing are not fully integrated, with reading controlling writing. However, we may question the contributions to reading made by such writing activities, as they fail to take into account the genuine connections readers make as they are reading, and conclude that such writing activities do not explore the reading - writing relationship. They keep hidden from the developing readers/writers the fact that one can find one's reactions and responses to texts by reflecting on them through writing.

Reading comprehension activities involving literary texts are among the most creative activities that can be offered in a Faculty of Letters to students of foreign languages. However, a questionnaire about reading (strategies, habits, involvement, expectations and motivation) applied to more than one hundred third-year-English minors before last year's lecture on reading in ELT showed surprising results. From the students' answers there emerged a complex picture of the perception of reading in the Faculty of Letters at "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University. Apparently, teaching reading is done both traditionally according to a transmission model, focussed on the retrieval of information from a text, and interactively.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The paper tries to find the causes of student dissatisfaction and suggests an alternative teaching strategy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire made up of 30 questions referring to the process of reading done in preparation or during the literature classes was administered to more than one hundred third-year students of the Faculty of Letters. The students were English minors, majoring in Romanian, French, Italian, Spanish, German or Russian. Such students study literature in both their major and minor language classes, to which are added classes of text analysis in both languages studied. Some of the students' relevant answers are analysed, which address their reactions to these literature classes. The questionnaire included such questions as:

- *Do you relate what you are reading to your own life experience?*
- *As you are reading, do you ever find yourself dialoguing with the author?*
- *Do you often find something of yourself in the literary texts you are reading?*
- *How often do you express your own opinions about a text in the classroom?*
- *What do your class contributions in the reading classes rely on (authorities, the instructor's interpretation, your classmates' interpretations)?*

RESULTS

In a few literature classes in either Romanian or a foreign language, the students perceive reading as dialogic and dynamic, as an engagement with the text, as an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of every individual student. This is because the

instructor allows the students to place at the centre of these reading classes their own reactions and responses, the meanings they make and re-make as they are reading, based on their own life experience and previous reading experience. By building a stimulating and tolerant atmosphere in the classroom and by allowing free expression, the instructor enables each student to understand the text under analysis through understanding himself/herself, in a kind of dialogue with the text. During such reading classes, the students confess that they create new texts in their minds, contributing to this process not only their critical perception, but also their own autobiographies and their own experience.

In other literature classes, however, the encounter 'student – text' is one-way, taking the form of a limited, instructor-mediated transmission of information, wisdom, values, and feelings from the text to the students. The students undertake a kind of reading experience that is not fully active or exploratory as they are not required to make their own meaning of the text. Instead, they are submitted to a ritualised reading activity led by the teacher and based on the suggestion, if not the specification, of "correct answers". A student's personal history and experience abate during such a text analysis, and the text message is understood as something that exists by itself in the text, rather than as something that *results* from the text.

The students' answers also suggest that most of their reading classes are based on whole class spoken activities, conducted by the instructor. According to the students, their own involvement and participation in these spoken activities vary quite significantly. Out of the 85 students who gave relevant answers, 21 report that they speak often or usually in the reading classes, for reasons ranging from the pleasure to take part in a debate, and the opportunity of expressing their own feelings to the hope they may receive bonuses for the term exam. Eleven students generally prefer to listen to what their classmates have to say and speak only when they have a clear, definite personal opinion. Eight students contribute to the reading classes only when they are asked to or when they are scheduled and have prepared their contribution in advance. To sum up, more than half of the students, 44 out of 85, almost never or seldom speak in the reading class. In this context, only a few voices stand apart, such as that of student 20.

I like to talk very much about the way I am seeing a text and even if I tell a stupid thing someone might correct me and I learn something from that. I think it's good to participate in the classroom and even if sometimes you may be wrong, at least you have tried.²

The question is why do most of the students behave differently? Does anything miss from some reading classes? Although 82% of the students say that they enjoy reading and only about 20% complain about the choice of readings assigned or about their number, they are either reluctant or have reservations about formulating their opinions openly.

○ **independence, self-confidence, risk-taking**

Only about 15% of the students seem to be open to the classroom experience; independent, and self-confident enough to be willing to take the risk of expressing original opinions and perhaps being wrong. Such students enjoy exploring options and playing with opinions, discussing fresh approaches, keeping their minds open and modulating their ideas. For example:

*I always express **my opinions** about a book in order to confront them with the **opinions** of my colleagues, to see what they think about that particular novel. A book is always a matter of debate. (Student 1)*

Student 1, very outspoken and equally open to the classroom experience, uses a word that appears obsessively in the students' answers: (*my own*) *opinion*.

Like student 1, many other students seem to appreciate the instructor's allowance for the students' personal opinions.

² The students' answers are unedited.

There are some teachers that allow us to express our own opinions, our own impressions even our feelings about the text. (Student 2)

That the freedom to express their own opinions is crucial for the students is stated clearly by student 3.

I usually like to have my own interpretation. I think I'm quite a stubborn person. (Student 3)

○ **sense of ownership**

The students' insistence on the ownership of the opinion leads us to believe that many of them value originality, ingenuity, and even unusualness. Taken to an extreme, this ownership makes sharing impossible, as student 21 states.

I used to express my opinions more often and freely in the past. Now I feel that what has value for me should be kept inside because by the very expression of something 'valuable' the value diminishes in a peculiar way. (Student 21)

Such answers show that at least some of the students, who are unwilling to take part in the classroom discussions and prefer to remain quiet, do so because they prefer to hold to their own interpretations. However, it is impossible to say to what extent these interpretations remain unchanged or are reshaped by the opinions expressed openly in the classroom. At least one of the students is aware of this type of effect that class discussions have on the students' opinions.

When I have some contribution in the classroom, it is mainly based on my own opinion on what I've read. My teacher's and my colleagues' interpretations may complete my interpretation or reveal to me some details I haven't noticed since then. (Student 23)

Quite a few students (19) manifest this strong sense of ownership as far as their class contributions are concerned. Many of them seem to come to class with definite pre-fabricated interpretations. These may or may not have been influenced by authorities such as the instructor or the recommended literature they read. One student stresses that s/he only speaks when s/he has something very personal to say, another says that her/his contributions rely only on her/his own opinions, although these may be modelled by the instructor's. Seventeen students stress that their class contributions may be influenced to various degrees by literary criticism. Nine students rely mainly or only on the authority of the critics. It is impossible to say if these students, whose literary interpretations have been influenced by their further readings, are still open to the dialogue in the classroom. They may have a sense that they have done their homework, performed their duty, and they feel safe about their opinions that cannot go wrong, and just contemplate their classmates' performance, without taking any risks.

What kills the students' disposition to dialogue? The authority of the critics? The authority of the instructor? Lack of courage? Apparently, the instructor's openness and flexibility are crucial in stimulating classroom discussions.

○ **instructor's lack of openness or flexibility**

The kind of instructor – student relationship that makes student contributions welcome is clearly described by students 28, 5 and 30.

I don't usually express my own opinions about the texts in the classroom. I do that only when I feel that the teacher is open to other ideas than what the critics say about a certain text. (Student 28)

At the opposite end of the continuum, we find the answers of students 5 and 30.

Some teachers don't even want to listen something they haven't said. So most of the time is better to keep quiet. (Student 5)

...there are many teachers that enjoy hearing only their opinions/ideas. So, I say nothing... (Student 30)

One student describes the solution s/he has found: relying on other authorities, although we can guess that these 'other authorities' are not necessarily the ones recommended by the instructor.

The teacher would like to hear his/her opinion quoted. But as the critics are subjective, I prefer relying on other authorities. (Student 27)

- **compulsory models of analysis**

Besides the authoritarian attitude of the instructor, it seems that the mandatory readings that offer models of analysis for the texts which the students are assigned also inhibit personal opinion.

We... are usually requested to reproduce the opinions of some critics or to focus on certain aspects we consider to be irrelevant. (Student 26)

... many teachers expect to hear from us their own opinions or the opinions of the writers mentioned in the bibliography. (Student 29)

Student 27, who relies “on other authorities” (see above), seems to be aware of this effect of the recommended authorities on his readings and prefers alternative sources; student 34 gives a reason for this ‘solution’.

My class contributions rely on authorities because I think that at the faculty teachers are not interested in students’ interpretations. (Student 34)

Student 8 analyses how the students’ voices ‘are killed’ little by little.

Teachers ... recommend us many different books in order to evaluate a literary text. Thus, our ‘voices’ have been ‘killed’ little by little. (Student 8)

However, the opinions of the peers do not inhibit the students’ opinions in the manner that the interpretations found in the recommended literature do.

[My class contributions rely] mostly on my colleagues’ interpretations, because then I could express my opinions, contradict or support them. (Student 25)

A student such as 25 has certainly understood that interpretation is not only construing, but also constructing, that as interpreters students are not only supposed to decode, but also to make their own meaning and moreover, that meaning can be reached more easily in interaction.

- **complying with the model: being right or wrong**

Constant reference to models produces fear of exposure in the students: they are afraid of being wrong in what they say. Apparently, they reach the conclusion that reading is a matter of (re)presenting the ‘right’ set of ideas and the ‘correct interpretation’. They seem to distrust and dismiss their own interpretation attempts, trying to guess instead what the instructor wants to hear.

I only express my opinions about a text in the classroom when I am very sure that I am not wrong. I know that this is not a good thing but something retains me from giving an answer which might be wrong. (Student 10)

... Our comments may be sometimes wrong. (Student 14)

... in front of the teachers I always have the feeling that what I say/think is wrong. (Student 15)

Student 11 is particularly accurate in describing how lack of freedom of expression or choice stifles students’ motivation and undermines risk taking.

... The authorities’ opinions are considered the best and our comments on the texts are limited (sic!) to evaluating which of the literary critics’ opinions are the best. Another reason is that the authorities seem to have done their best exhausting the meanings of a book; new perspectives seem to be inferior to theirs. Another reason is that we are not encouraged enough to have our say. We’re somehow trained to rely on others and to keep our deeper opinions for ourselves. (Student 11)

- **frustration and demotivation**

The students voice their frustration at the way some classroom literary debates are organised and carried out, and also at a demotivating classroom atmosphere. They blame the inflexibility of the instructor, the opaqueness of the recommended books and their sheer number, but also the lack of

choice and the subordination of self-expression, which have all inhibiting effects on the students' in-class contributions. Therefore, literary debates held during the literature classes taught to language students at the Faculty of Letters seem to produce insecurity and negative feelings in many students. Their frustration can be expressed quite forcefully, as in the statements of students 11 (above), 13 and 32.

... sometimes ... I'm terrified my opinions could be wrong. (Student 13)

I usually get intimidated by the teacher and even by my classmates. The latter are usually so bored by everything that means school and reading that it is very difficult for me to speak about serious things. (Student 32)

A major risk is that such students may gradually come to distrust their relationships with the instructor, their classmates and the world of school, and feel more and more diminished.

A most alarming voice is that of student 16, who is aware that s/he is losing trust in her/his own judgement.

There are occasions when I do not trust my own judgement of a book and I do not have the courage to put [it] into words. (Student 16)

I express very rarely my own opinions about a text because I'm afraid that they might be wrong and the teacher will think something of me which is not true; in other words, I'm afraid I might be 'judged' by what I say in that moment. And I prefer to sit and listen and talk to myself, saying 'I was right. I should have said it' or 'I was wrong, it was good for me that I kept my mouth shut'. My attitude may seem childish at my age, but that's how I feel. (Student 19)

CONCLUSIONS

As some of the students themselves suggested in their answers, reading can be integrated with writing. Thus, an alternative to asking for the students' oral opinion on a text is asking them to write for a limited amount of time about what they have read: asking questions about words, sentences, fragments they find to be confusing, interesting, significant, moving, puzzling or describing their immediate reactions to the passages that caught their attention. During this writing period, the students can find expression for their reactions and responses to the text by reflecting on it through writing. They are certain to be selective and diverse in what they are doing if the instructor gives them this alternative. When they are asked to read their responses, they will soon realise that various readers view different passages as being important, different moments or episodes as being significant, and they will also give different explanations for why this is so. These different responses are clear evidence that reading is a creative and constructive process. The students become aware of the existence and legitimacy of multiple interpretations.

No student can gain competence and knowledge or know oneself as a competent reader, save through communication with oneself and with the others involved with him in the same kind of enterprise (Petrosky, 1982; Zamel, 1992). Without a *THOU*, there is no *I* evolving. Without an *IT*, there is no content in the context. Reading literature at its best is a three-cornered relationship.

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