Challenges in Negotiating Meaning in Literary Texts: The Case of English as a Second Language (ESL) Students

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Abstract*: The paper sought to establish the root causes of English as a Second Language (ESL) students' poor performance in literary texts at tertiary level. It reviewed literature based on the studies conducted on English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Some of the findings include: lack of vocabulary hinders ESL students from understanding literary texts; lack of background knowledge and cultural background results in a lack of understanding of the literary texts; and texts which are not culturally related and difficult reduce students' interest in reading literary texts.*
Key words*: English as a Second Language (ESL); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); literary texts*

I.   Introduction

The performance of students, especially English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in literary texts in English has not been satisfactory over the years. This has led to studies being conducted (see Phelps, 2007; Moyo, 1996; Thyab, 2016) in order to understand the root causes, and in order to inform educators and lecturers to better understand some of the challenges faced by ESL and EFL students in literary texts in English from the ESL or EFL student's vantage point.

The paper sought to establish the root causes of the problem by reviewing relevant literature based on studies on ESL and EFL students and their performance on literary texts, especially at tertiary level.

II.   Research Objective

The objective of the paper was to establish the root causes of poor performance of ESL and EFL students in literary texts in English.

III. Literature Review

The review includes English Foreign Language studies as well. This was done to accommodate the South African context where, according to Van der Walt et al. (2009), ESL and EFL teaching are determined by two factors, that is, for what purpose the language is being learnt; and, what is the status of the language in society.

The authors argue that in order for a language to be regarded as a second language (or first additional language), beside the fact that it is learnt after the first language, it must be learnt so that it is used as a medium of instruction. Secondly, if a language, like English in South Africa, occupies high status in society because of its dominance in education and in the work environment, it is viewed as a second language for non-native speakers. In addition, 'in the case of a FAL the learner is exposed to the language outside the classroom too, while the SAL learner (second additional language or foreign language) will have limited contact with the target language' (Van der Walt, 2009: 6).

Wallace (1986), as cited by Bouazid and Le Roux, argues that learning to read happens once – usually in the first language. Therefore, reading in the second language requires the extension of the same literacy. This is, however, a simplistic approach to reading in general, and in particular, as the direction of the study dictates, the reading of literary texts. To put matters into better perspective, Wallace (ibid) further postulates that reading strategies that are demanded by one language may not be the same for another one. Therefore, a reader who is seeking competence in a second language, 'a language, whose meaning making is different from the reader's first language,' will require different reading skills.

Another factor which distinguishes second language from first language reading, according to Koda (2007), as cited by Bouazid and Le Roux (2010), is that second language learning is cross-linguistic, and so by its very nature is more complex than the first language. The implication thereof is that reading a second language involves two languages, which factor necessitates that there is an interaction between them. So, the reader needs to adjust his or her reading strategies so as to accommodate the demands imposed by each language.

A salient point to observe in this paper is that 'engagement in literary studies presupposes adequate reading skills' – skills like word recognition and working out the meanings of words, which is a cognitive function (Urquhart & Weir, 1998, as cited by Bouazid & Le Roux, 2010). However, as Grabe and Stoller (2002) argue, this is very elemental. They also add that literary texts need to be interpreted, comprehended and critiqued, therefore, students are assumed to be equipped with these skills when they undertake literary studies. These skills form part of what is known as literary competence.

From the foregoing discussion it is apparent that there are differences between first and second language reading (in this case, of literary texts). This is the point of departure for this study. The pioneers of second language reading research are Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). The two researchers, as Bouazid and Le Roux (2010) state, attempted to work out a model based on the reading strategies that were employed by successful second language students. What is important to note in their study is the fact that they dealt with good language learners. This excludes everyday pedagogic situations which are characterised by heterogeneous student groups of different cognitive abilities. More important is the necessity for a substantive theory from the ground which accounts for what happens to a second language reader of literature. The presupposition of a competent reader prior to the engagement with the literary texts falls short, especially in informing English literary pedagogy.

Snapper (2011) presents his classroom experiences as a high school teacher and, subsequently, as a researcher at a university in a well-articulated paper. The author's experiences prompted him to conduct an exploration of the relationship between school and university English. He followed a group of A Level Literature students to university. He sets out by asking a number of questions about the specialist knowledge that a teacher is required to communicate to literature students:

Is that knowledge simply a broad knowledge of many individual texts, periods and authors, or [does] it add up to something more generalizable – a frame of knowledge and skills for the study of literature, perhaps? What exactly do I know from my own university education about these frameworks: the nature of genre, narrative, form, metaphor and literary language … or Shakespeare's theatre or Modernism? And how might I best formulate that knowledge authoritatively for teaching?

In our own assessment these questions bring to light some fundamental points regarding the study of literature. The author is asking himself what knowledge and skills he derived from literature from his own university education. This poses a serious question as to how studying literary works transfers into skills and knowledge. What appears to be of concern to the author is the difficulty to adapt literary jargon like 'narrative, metaphor or Shakespeare's theatre' into knowledge that brings about meaningful learning experiences to the students.

In addition, the author states that there are some questions that pertain to culture and values in literature and how syllabuses and examination papers entrench certain attitudes and perspectives. In his interaction with school students (pupils), the author notes that there are many issues that have to do with literary and cultural value as well as social power which lay in the background of literature teaching that need to be examined. The researcher admits that his students had to accept that the texts that they were studying were 'literature' and that they had to 'appreciate' them in order to pass their examinations. What remains to be interrogated is whether the author's students really appreciated the texts. Another question is whether the culture, values, attitudes and perspectives that are 'entrenched' in literature, syllabi and examination papers are relevant to the student's life experiences.

All the same, the author argues further, the students were happy to read, discuss and study great literary works and he was also happy to teach them. But the author remained concerned that there was something missing from literary study. He felt that ignoring questions of culture, value and perspective of the functions and methods of literary study was not adequate as these questions were central.

In summing up, Snapper (2011) points out the following: One of the lecturers in his study was concerned that students who came to them from A Level were not prepared for the idea of literary study as cultural analysis rather than as 'appreciation'.

He argues that as much as the ideas about cultural value and perspective are central to university English, there is a danger of drawing students into the project of cultural analysis through literature and literary theory. These approaches alienate students because they are written in complex language and the concepts presented are difficult, especially when introduced at the beginning of a degree programme.

He further argues that literary theory and other critical perspectives material are inappropriately pitched, as a result, the importance of student voice, understanding students' background and their values and motivations are lost.

Snapper refers to Vygotsky's zones of proximal development. That is, teaching and curriculum should start where students are. Students should be asked to talk about where they are. What students value and think should be considered.

The author highlights what lecturers assume students from high school know. These assumptions include:

What criticism and theory are and what they are for, or the social mechanics of being a poet or a poetry lover or theatre-goer – when many, in fact, don't.

From the foregoing, the lecturers' assumptions are engendered by the general premise that is adopted in literary studies that students, irrespective of their background and other sociocultural factors, are competent readers. What this premise fails to appreciate is that some students enrol for literary studies with the view to become competent readers, speakers, writers and even listeners. A view that falls short in admitting that some university students are at ground zero in the hierarchy of literary competence is bound to yield inappropriate teaching approaches to literature, and a general poor performance by students.

Lastly, the author states that we need to understand the network of values, attitudes and perspectives which students, teachers and lecturers bring to the study of literature. What should be understood is what happens when English stops being a school subject and becomes a university subject.

Clearly, Snapper (2011) has made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of what students go through from high school to university. He has mentioned what lecturers expect students should know as well as the experiences they are assumed to have. The author has questioned the cultural factor when it comes to literary studies. However, he does not attempt to find answers from the students about the relevance of cultural and value systems presented in literary texts to their lives. Whilst the researcher in the study above relied heavily on the views of lecturers, this paper relies wholly on the views of the students.

In an earlier study, entitled 'Beyond English Literature A Level: The silence of the seminar?'Snapper (2009) makes a number of observations on the transition from English Literature A Level to University English. He points out that there is a disjuncture between A Level and University English. In addition, students experience problems that emanate from the manner of course material presentation by lecturers, and not the course content. Students and lecturers do not share the same agenda, and students do not know why the agenda exists in the first place as it assumes they have some prior knowledge about literature. This prior knowledge is assumed by lecturers as: 1) students have knowledge about literature in general; 2) students have knowledge about literature as a cultural phenomenon; and 3) students have knowledge about literary studies as a discipline. The author observes that these assumptions are never realised as they pose an 'intellectual coming-of-age' phenomenon for the first year students – a phenomenon that creates a lot of expectation on the part of the students.

Snapper (ibid) also observed that when it came to reading, students were affected by the volume of reading; they were 'poorly organised and lazy to read secondary critical texts.' They found these texts challenging, so they constantly needed the lecturers' mediation. The layout of the anthologies of literary studies also posed a challenge to the students as they lacked useful information, such as 'summaries, guidance or context'.

Furthermore, students from A Level were also affected by the little time the lecturers spent teaching as well as the impersonal nature of contact between lecturers and students. Impersonal in that there was no individual attention dedicated to each student, but the group at large was always addressed.

Further disjuncture existed between first and second year modules, as well as between current and previous lectures. In short, lecturers failed to establish where the students were (in terms of knowledge gap) – instead they 'ploughed through their agenda' without allowing a discussion of the underlying issues affecting students. Such issues would include 'course outcomes, being a critic, some important aspects of the text' as well as the key issues in the cultural and social context of the text.

As a result of the misguided expectation of the lecturers and their inability to establish the necessary links within and between the courses, students tended to revert to the traditional paradigm or approach to literature by focusing on theme, character and plot instead of approaching literary texts as 'objects of socio-cultural study'.

The foregoing discussion has evinced the kind of frustration that is experienced by new university students. The situation in the South African ESL curriculum is also characterised by the traditional approach to literature. The respondents in the study are likely to have been expected to adopt their lecturers' 'agenda' – the agenda they were not accustomed to.

Moyo (1996) sought to establish whether literature texts use in English Second Language (ESL) classrooms was relevant to the learners' culture. The first question asked by the study was whether the learners found the texts set outside Africa relevant to their world of experiences and culture. In response to this question, 62.5% learners indicated that they found Macbeth and some British and American poetry not relevant to their world and culture. The respondents who believed that these texts were relevant to their life experiences constituted 37, 5%, and they held this view on the basis that these 'literary works dealt with universal human issues of nature, love, death, et cetera' (1996: 45).

Secondly, the study asked if learners found Macbeth, British and American poetry readable and comprehensible. In other words, they had to indicate whether they were able to read the play (Macbeth) independently with understanding. 75% of the respondents found Macbeth 'impossible' to read and they indicated that they had to depend on the teacher for the story and events. 70%, on the one hand, indicated that the language in Macbeth, poetry and the novel (Crocodile Burning) was 'difficult and above their comprehension level' (1996:45). On the other hand, 30% found the language in these texts to be fairly understandable. This percentage of respondents also said that the novel was relevant to their experiences and culture, but it took them a long time to finish it (208 pages long).

It was concluded from the responses gathered that language accessibility of texts determined the relevance of a text to the readers. This fact brings to light the need to 're-examine the criteria of the choice of texts so that the reading of literature would be meaningful and, therefore, relevant to the learners' (Ibid: 46). The recommendation by the author is that the question of culture and cross-cultural communication should be fully explained to the learners. He (Moyo, 1996) points out that learners will appreciate and contextualise texts if they have been exposed to the socioeconomic, cultural, political and historical setting of the text.

The question of language is equally important. If it is 'comprehensible, it must offer personal involvement in the reader.' The reader's 'involvement' comes about as he 'engages imaginatively with the text from a mechanical aspect of the language system to the analytical aspect – as he pursues the development of the story' (Ibid: 47). In our analysis, the contextualisation of texts, as recommended in the previous paragraph, goes a long way in ensuring that these young readers share the same cultural schemata as the writer. On the other hand, this didactic approach to literature by teachers may lead to readers' overdependence on the external intervention (by the teacher) before they can fully appreciate a literary text. This contextualisation, pedagogically sound as it is, may be comparable to mathematical formulas, which may deprive a text of its artistic nature. This argument brings to the fore a factor to literary studies that may be a bitter pill to swallow. That is, for as long as students engage in literary studies with the view to write examination, they will be prone not to respond to or appreciate literary texts with originality of thought. They will seek acceptable views on a text under study.

Phelps (2007) made the observation that in teaching Sons and Lovers (a novel by D.H. Lawrence) at the University of Zululand, students responded differently to the two parts of the novel. In terms of their background, his students were an 'urban and rural mix'. He found that 'Part 1 of the novel had far more interest for his students than Part 2.' The part that interested these students had to do with 'the conflict between working-class parents, and its impact on their education.' The author concedes that the second part of the novel 'seemed more remote'. The author propounds reasons for the differential reception of the two respective sections of the novel. He ascribes them to the fact that:

Difficulties at home between fathers and mothers in the changing political and economic conditions of South Africa were not far removed from Walter and Gertrude Morel's problems. The opening pages of the novel… sketch out the change to rural Eastwood in the 1830s with the advent of coal mines, point out that this change roughly coincided with the arrival of English settlers in Natal and Zululand. This larger historical context helped connect the intimate psychological struggles in the Morel family, so powerfully dramatized by Lawrence, with the historical and current experiences of the students' own families (Phelps, 2007: 82).

Worth noting in the above quotation are references to things that are familiar to the students. They include: 'home', 'not far removed', 'coincided', 'related', 'historical context', 'connect', 'current experiences', et cetera. All these words have the common denominator: the circumstances and events in Part are more meaningful to the students' 'own families'. Relating to another novel by D.H. Lawrence, Lady Chatterly's Lover, the author admits that his 'students could quickly see how the relationship of Mellors and Bertha Coutts from an oppressed working class presented a believable degeneration into a sexual battle devoid of sympathy and friendship'. The historical context of the South African students referred to in the paper, would easily identify with an oppressed working class in the midst of the apartheid era. One point to add in the light of the foregoing review is that the units of analysis are the same as the population of the study undertaken here. The differences, though, would be the setting in terms of time, research methodology and scope of the topic – the reviewed article being limited to D.H. Lawrence's two works.

In an article 'Exploring ESL Learners' Reading Strategies in Understanding Literary Texts', Hasim and Din (2009) highlight some of the problems that are encountered by English second language (ESL) students in understanding literary texts. These include:

1) Linguistic complexity of a literary text, in terms of words and sentence structure.
2) The 'deep meaning' results in multiple interpretations of words and sentences.
3) Lack of background knowledge and cultural background results in a lack of understanding of the literary texts.
4) Texts which are not culturally related and difficult reduce students' interest in reading literary texts.
5) Length of text or word count plays a role in sustaining the interest of the second language reader.

6) The selection of inappropriate texts for the second language reader results in poor understanding and lack of interest in reading and appreciating literary texts.
7) Lack of vocabulary hinders ESL students from understanding literary texts.

What is worth noting about the above conclusions is that they speak directly to second language students. Contrary to a common assumption that a reader of a literary text is competent in the language of literary discourse, this study does not put the first and the second language speakers on the same footing. For these students, English is a second language (and a foreign language for some) as they speak Malay Java at home and school.

Hasim and Din (2009) also underscore the significance of the reading strategies that should be possessed by a reader of a literary text, or any other text. They cite Caverly and Orlando (1991) who have categorised them into: cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies and affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are applicable when the mind processes linguistic content. In this case the content is plot and other devices which can be regarded as literary input, since it is expressed in the form of language. The cognitive strategy involves, as O'Malley and Chamot (1990), as cited by Hasim and Din (ibid) propound, repetition, note-taking, translating, conceptualisation, highlighting, summarising, and others.

Rodhika (1991) is cited by Ketema (2012) mentioning another difficulty faced by EFL learners using literary texts. This is the linguistic difficulty of the text and the lack of the background knowledge of the English language and culture, which are requisites for the EFL reader to interpret literary texts. However, it must be brought to light that this view falls short in recognising that as English has become a global lingua franca; there are many English literary texts that come from typical EFL contexts.

The question that emerges from this discussion is whether or not there are differences between first language and second language reading strategies. Admittedly, the ability to read in one's first language should serve as an advantage when a student is confronted with a text written in a second language. Simultaneously, there should be some drawbacks that emanate from the fact that one is not reading in one's first language. Cunningham (2005), as cited by Walker and White (2013: 45), says that first language reading commences when at least 5000 words have already been acquired.

On the other hand, second language readers are 'confronted with vocabulary they do not know' as well as the 'syntactic patterns they are unfamiliar with.' These readers have to constantly monitor how well they have understood the text and if there are problems in their understanding they have to find the solutions. It may be deduced from this argument that a first and a second language speaker of English would not normally be on the same pedestal when they have to read a literary text.

However, it may be argued that second language readers are varied: some, especially children, may display little or no difference from monolinguals. There are first language speakers who struggle with literary texts. Perhaps the argument here is meant for those who acquire the second language in adulthood, or those who come from an impoverished target language exposure.

In the light of the foregoing one needs to concede that even second language readers do not share the same competence in the second language. In regard to this admission, Perfetti (1991) is cited by Walker and White (2013) highlighting some of the challenges that confront the students who have the lower proficiency in the second language. In terms of their cognitive ability, they tend to process individual words which leave them in no position to focus on 'constructing larger scale understanding and critical interpretation of the whole text' (Ibid: 45).

Second language readers need to employ specific strategies for them to master a text. These have been divided into bottom-up and top-down processes of reading. For Walker and White (ibid), bottom-up processes include the ability of the reader to match the written symbols with sounds, word identification, making use of syntactic information in the construction of meaning, and using working memory to assist the operations that have been mentioned here.

IV. Concluding Reflections

The paper has argued that language difficulty in a literary text, coupled with relative lexical impoverishment of some ESL students, is responsible for some students struggling with literary texts. Literary texts, by their nature, require interpreting, comprehending and critiquing, the skills that are indisputably required from any literary scholar. It, therefore, is vital that lecturers have an understanding and appreciation of this reality prior to the selection of literary texts, and the level at which texts are prescribed, and that students too, prepare themselves thoroughly for the task ahead, as simply prescribing 'simpler' texts in order to accommodate students may not necessarily serve any purpose. As it has been argued above, it is a fact that there are students who enrol for studies in literature in English with the sole aim of becoming competent readers, writers and speakers of the language, with the hope that upon successful completion of the course the outcome would be grammatical competence and performance, as well.

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