

Developing a sense of quality

To put it into a nutshell, 'good' literature, according to Rother/Bendl, is characterized by six features: quality of permanence, awareness of full context, organic unity, originality, concern with truth, and multivalence. This summary or the statements in the table above, though each of them may be cast into doubt, can be presented in class after a literary text has been read. A critical discussion of the criteria themselves as well as a comparison between the criteria and the text can make learners develop a certain sense of – or feeling for – the quality of literature.

5.3 Intercultural awareness

What has literature got to do with intercultural learning?

Literature and intercultural learning

In the 1990s people began to see the potential of literature for intercultural learning (Kramsch 1993, Bredella 2002, Delanoy 2002, Müller-Hartmann/Schocker-von Dittfurth 2004). Language and culture are inseparable, and foreign literature represents linguistic and cultural otherness. When our students read a foreign text, they experience other value systems and are forced to compare the home and foreign identities in a process of intercultural learning. "In the process of relating their own values and world view(s) to those of the text, comparing and contrasting them, learners might change and co-ordinate perspectives and thus begin to understand the other culture" (Müller-Hartmann/Schocker-von Dittfurth 2004: 123). So teaching foreign literature can arouse curiosity and openness towards the other culture, ask the readers to decentre from their own positions, force them to change perspectives, make them reflect on auto- and hetero-stereotypes, all of which may lead to a better understanding between different cultures.

Kramsch's Third Place

If we follow Claire Kramsch (1993), reading foreign literature may lead us to the Third Place. When learners' understanding of a foreign language develops they may come to understand other values which are familiar to the foreign culture, but alien to their own culture. Nevertheless their understanding of these values is still different to that of the native speaker. So foreign language learning takes place in a Third Place, which the learner must make for him/herself between their first culture (C1) and

the foreign language culture (C2). They must try to adopt four perspectives – how members of the foreign culture see themselves (C2 – C2), how they see us and our culture (C2 – C1), how we see the foreign culture and their members (C1 – C2), and how we see ourselves (C1 – C1). This involves the learners in a constant reflection of C1 and C2, and as they choose those meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives, individual interpretations of culture rather than rigid stereotypical notions are promoted.

To facilitate this process, literary texts should be selected which tell about the lives of (young) people from other cultures, including the whole field of children's and young adult literature. Intercultural conflicts and causes for misunderstanding are particularly dramatised in post-colonial literature and minority texts. Moreover texts written by learners from other cultures can be studied – and compared with one's own texts. Such interactive projects may take the form of e-mail exchanges between classes in two different countries, discussing the same literary text from two cultural points of view. So the choice of a suitable text must be accompanied by setting tasks that "facilitate negotiation of meaning between the foreign culture represented in the text and the learners' own culture" (Müller-Hartmann/Schocker-von Dittfurth 2004: 123).

To foster intercultural awareness, teachers may also use a text written by a member of C2 that deals with one's own culture (C1). In Katherine Mansfield's amusing short story *Germans at Meat*, the middle-class Germans before World War I are the object of her satire. A close reading and appropriate follow-up tasks can explore all four perspectives. Analysing content, theme and form shows how the (British) narrator assesses the German culture – obsession by food, lack of decency, boastfulness etc. (C2 – C1). It will also make clear how she sees her own culture, not only regarding tea (C2 – C2). Learners can be asked whether they share Herr Rat's opinions of the British (C1 – C2). They can also be encouraged to reflect on Frau Stiegelauer's and Herr Rat's behaviour and attitudes (C1 – C1).

Suitable texts and tasks

An example:
Germans at Meat

readers must adopt four perspectives
↓
intercultural learning

Katherine Mansfield: **Germans at Meat** (first third of text)

Bread soup was placed upon the table.

"Ah," said the Herr Rat, leaning upon the table as he peered into the tureen, "that is what I need. My 'magen' has not been in order for several days. Bread soup, and just the right consistency.

I am a good cook myself" – he turned to me.

"How interesting," I said, attempting to infuse just the right amount of enthusiasm into my voice.

"Oh yes – when one is not married it is necessary. As for me, I have had all I wanted from women without marriage."

He tucked his napkin into his collar and blew upon his soup as he spoke. "Now at nine o'clock I make myself an English breakfast, but not much. Four slices of bread, two eggs, two slices of cold ham, one plate of soup, two cups of tea – that is nothing to you." He asserted the fact so vehemently that I had not the courage to refute it.

All eyes were suddenly turned upon me. I felt I was bearing the burden of the nation's preposterous breakfast – I who drank a cup of coffee while buttoning my blouse in the morning.

"Nothing at all," cried Herr Hoffman from Berlin. "Ach, when I was in England in the morning I used to eat."

He turned up his eyes and his moustache, wiping the soup drippings from his coat and waistcoat.

"Do they really eat so much?" asked Fraulein Stiegelauer.

"Soup and baker's bread and pig's flesh, and tea and coffee and stewed fruit, and honey and eggs, and cold fish and kidneys, and hot fish and liver. All the ladies eat, too, especially the ladies?"

"Certainly. I myself have noticed it, when I was living in a hotel in Leicester Square," cried the Herr Rat. "It was a good hotel, but they could not make tea – now –"

"Ah, that's one thing I can do," said I, laughing brightly,

"I can make very good tea. The great secret is to warm the teapot."

"Warm the teapot," interrupted the Herr Rat, pushing away his soup plate. "What do you warm the teapot for? Ha! ha! that's very good! One does not eat the teapot, I suppose?"

He fixed his cold blue eyes upon me with an expression which suggested a thousand premeditated invasions.

"So that is the great secret of your English tea? All you do is to warm the teapot."

I wanted to say that was only the preliminary canter, but could not translate it, and so was silent.

The servant brought in veal, with "sauerkraut" and potatoes.

"I eat sauerkraut with great pleasure," said the Traveller from North Germany, "but now I have eaten so much of it that I cannot retain it. I am immediately forced to –"

"A beautiful day," I cried, turning to Fraulein Stiegelauer. "Did you get up early?"

"At five o'clock I walked for ten minutes in the wet grass. Again in bed. At half-past five I fell asleep, and woke at seven, when I made an 'over-body' washing! Again in bed. At eight o'clock I had a cold-water poultice, and at half-past eight I drank a cup of mint tea. At nine I drank some malt coffee, and began my 'cure.' Pass me the sauerkraut, please. You do not eat it?"

"No, thank you. I still find it a little strong."

From: Mansfield, Katherine: *In a German Pension*, 1911

Such inter-cultural learning involves intra-cultural awareness and empathy in general. Readers learn how people can talk about what they think, want and feel. They learn that another person feels differently about something to what they are used to – a different love, a different hatred. Philosophy professor Peter Bieri put it this way: "Er kann, weil sein begriffliches Repertoire größer geworden ist, nuancierter über sein Erleben reden, und das wiederum ermöglicht ihm, differenzierter zu empfinden" (Bieri 2007: 27).

Tasks

1. Look back at how to encourage a positive attitude towards literature. Then reflect on how the following aphorisms relate to these various ways:
 - a) Readers are made by readers.
 - b) The second best way to learn a foreign language is extensive reading.
 - c) Reading is like an infectious disease. It is caught, not taught. (Nuttall)
 - d) Teachers must encourage pupils to want to read.
 - e) People learn to read, and to read better, by reading. (Eskey)

2. What is your opinion of the British Education Secretary's plea for special boys' bookshelves in classrooms?
3. Popular writers who produce one bestseller after the other are very often not regarded as serious authors, and their products called literary trash. What could be the reasons for their enormous commercial success then?
4. The New York Times reviewed the new bestseller by French literature professor Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read?* What do you think of his attitude and suggestions?

Read It? No, but You Can Skim a Few Pages and Fake It

PARIS, Feb. 23 — It may well be that too many books are published, but by good fortune, not all must be read. In practice, primed by publishers, critics, teachers, authors and word-of-mouth, a form of natural selection limits essential reading to those classics and best sellers that become part of civilized intellectual and social discourse.

Of course, many people don't get through these books, either, and too embarrassed to admit it, they worry constantly about being exposed as philistines. Now Pierre Bayard, a Paris University literature professor, has come to their rescue with a survivor's guide to life in the chattering classes. And it is evidently much in need. "How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read?" has become a best seller here, with translation rights snapped up across Europe and under negotiation in Britain and the United States. "I am surprised because I hadn't imagined how guilty nonreaders feel," Mr. Bayard, 52, said in an interview. "With this book, they can shake off their guilt without psychoanalysis, so it's much cheaper."

Mr. Bayard reassures them that there is no obligation to read, and confesses to lecturing students on books that he has either not read or has merely skimmed. And he recalls passionate exchanges with people who also have not read the book under discussion.

He further cites writers like Montaigne, who could not remember what he read, and Paul Valéry, who found ways

of praising authors whose books he had never opened. Mr. Bayard finds characters in novels by Graham Greene, David Lodge and others who cheerfully question the need to read at all. And he refuses to be intimidated by Proust or Joyce. Having demonstrated that non-readers are in good company, Mr. Bayard then offers tips on how to cover up ignorance of a "must-read" book. ... Students, he noted from experience, are skilled at opining about books they have not read, building on elements he may have provided in a lecture. This approach can also work in the more exposed arena of social gatherings: the book's cover, reviews and other public reaction to it, gossip about the author and even the current conversation can all provide food for sounding informed.

One alternative, he said, is to try to change the subject. Another is to admit not knowing a particular book while suggesting knowledge of the so-called "collective library" into which the book fits.

But Mr. Bayard's most daring suggestion is that nonreaders should talk about themselves, using the pretext of the book without dwelling on its contents. In this way, he said, they are forced to tap their imagination and, in effect, invent their own book. "To be able to talk with finesse about something one does not know is worth more than the universe of books," he writes.

www.nytimes.com/2007/02/24/books/24read.htm 24/02/07