

BROADENING HORIZONS IN STYLISTICS: THE MULTIMEDIA LAB AS A CHALLENGING TOOL FOR TEXT ANALYSIS IN EFL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Making use of the Multimedia Lab as a potential tool for text analysis, i.e., a way of exploring stylistic features in, for instance, literary texts, is the main purpose of our paper. This is the outcome of a joint action research carried out in an EFL setting, namely at upper-intermediate and/or advanced language levels (4th undergraduate year) of the English Degree at the University of Madeira. Hence it is our aim to focus on the possibilities of broadening horizons in Stylistics Analysis, via new techniques and technologies. Our approach gives special attention to different layers of meaning already familiar to our students, notably graphology, lexis, syntax, cohesion, semantics, register and function. These are particularly striking in the two passages and/or points of entry selected from an English contemporary novel to be analysed without students' prior knowledge of author, period, and English language variety. All in all, we wish to increase students' motivation, promote their literary/cultural/language awareness, and enhance their reflective skills in an innovative environment –the Multimedia Lab– which replaces the traditional Language Lab, previously exclusive to foreign language teaching/learning.

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KEY WORDS

Interactive reading; layers of meaning; literary/cultural/language awareness; multimedia lab; narrative voice; reading in education; stylistic features; technological tools.

RESUMEN

El principal objetivo de este trabajo es el uso del Laboratorio Multimedia como herramienta potencial para el análisis de textos, es decir, un modo de explorar rasgos estilísticos en, por ejemplo, textos literarios. Es el resultado de una investigación acción conjunta llevada a cabo en un contexto de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, concretamente en los niveles *upper-intermediate* y/o *advanced* (cuarto año de carrera) en la Titulación de Inglés de la Universidad de Madeira. Por tanto nuestro objetivo es centrarnos en las posibilidades de abrir nuevos horizontes en el Análisis de Textos por medio de nuevas técnicas y tecnologías. Nuestro enfoque presta una especial atención a los diferentes estratos de significado con los que los alumnos ya están familiarizados, en particular grafología, léxico, sintaxis, cohesión, semántica, registro y función. Son especialmente notables en los dos pasajes y/o puntos de entrada de una novela inglesa contemporánea seleccionados para ser analizados, sin que los alumnos conozcan previamente autor, período o variedad lingüística. En conjunto, pretendemos incrementar la motivación de los alumnos, fomentar su conciencia literaria/cultural/lingüística, y mejorar sus destrezas de reflexión en un entorno innovador –el Laboratorio Multimedia– que sustituye al Laboratorio de Idiomas tradicional, que hasta ahora era utilizado exclusivamente para la enseñanza/aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Lectura interactiva, estratos de significado, conciencia literaria/cultural/lingüística, laboratorio multimedia, voz narrativa, lectura en educación, rasgos estilísticos, herramientas tecnológicas.

RÉSUMÉ

L'utilisation du Laboratoire de Multimedia servant d'outil pour l'analyse de textes, autrement dit, comme moyen d'explorer les caractéristiques stylistiques des textes littéraires, tel est l'objet de notre article. Celui-ci est le résultat d'une action de recherche conjointe, menée dans le cadre de l'enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère, notamment aux niveaux intermédiaire-avancé et/ou avancé (4ème année d'études) de la Maîtrise d'anglais à l'Université de Madère. Nous proposons donc de centrer notre étude sur les possibilités d'élargir les horizons de l'analyse stylistique par le moyen des nouvelles techniques et technologies.

Notre abordage met, en particulier, l'accent sur les différents niveaux de signification du texte, déjà familiers pour nos étudiants, notamment la graphologie, le lexis, la syntaxe, la cohésion, la sémantique, le registre et la

fonction. Ceux-ci sont bien évidents dans les deux extraits et/ou points d'entrée choisis dans un roman anglais contemporain afin d'être analysés sans que les étudiants aient connaissance préalable de l'auteur, de l'époque, et des particularités de la langue.

Notre but a été d'augmenter la motivation de nos étudiants, de promouvoir leur perception littéraire/culturelle/et de la langue, et de mettre en évidence leur capacité de réflexion dans un environnement innovateur –le Laboratoire de Multimedia– qui remplace le Laboratoire de Langues traditionnel dédié, auparavant, exclusivement à l'enseignement/apprentissage des langues étrangères.

MOTS-CLÉ

Lecture interactive; niveaux de signification; perception littéraire/culturelle/et de la langue; laboratoire de multimedia; voix narrative; l'instruction par la lecture; caractéristiques stylistiques; outils technologiques.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Broadening horizons in stylistics seems of utmost importance in our contemporary information era. Stylistics might be used in a wider context, namely in the teaching/learning of a foreign language, drawing benefits from technological breakthroughs whatever the setting, via new techniques and technologies. Also, we wish to increase students' motivation, promote their literary/cultural/language awareness, and enhance their reflective skills in an innovative environment –the multimedia lab– which replaces the traditional language lab, previously exclusive to foreign language teaching/learning. As far as tools are concerned, we used those available in our multimedia lab and broadly familiar to our students: a computer main frame/server connected to 20 PCs arranged in U-shape in the lab, files to be accessed individually by students, *Concise Oxford Dictionary* CD ROM, 9th edition with sound / Windows '95 compatible, Web / Internet, Videotape (headphones), Smart Board, without excluding the more traditional OHP.

Accordingly, and reiterating Donald Leu and Charles Kinzer's liberating and empowering literacy concerns in education, a problem-setting/problem-solving methodology backed up by the ever-growing number of technical gadgets will "provide powerful preparation in developing the skills central to success in an information economy: accessing the best information, doing so in the shortest time, using this information to identify and solve the most important problems, and then communicating these solutions to others" (2000, p. 114). Thus students should be prepared "for the effective use of new information

technologies that will become increasingly available as we continue to change from an industrial to an information society” (2000, p. 113).

In this respect, the reading of literary texts cannot be dissociated from literacy education as a powerful resource for language, literary, and culture awareness, to follow the theoretical literature published over the last two decades in stylistics, literature teaching and discourse analysis (Halliday, Widdowson, Leech, Fowler, Sinclair, Carter, McRae, Durant and Simpson, to name but a few).

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

It is our purpose, in this paper, to present some of the possibilities of criss-crossing the aforementioned theories with reading in education in an English as foreign language class, that is at upper-intermediate and/or advanced language levels (4th undergraduate year) of the English Degree at the University of Madeira. In so doing, a joint action research was carried out comprising three different stages, the first of which deserves here a special attention as a feasible way-in to a literary text in an EFL setting, via new information technologies (See Unit Plan, Appendix, pp. i-vi):

- First, analysing a literary text, still a controversial type of text in an EFL teaching/learning situation (and Portugal is one among several instances), particularly relevant in this case as we put forward the use of the various resources offered in a multimedia lab, especially “if we wish to prepare ... [individuals] for their futures in a workplace where collaboration and communication skills are so important” (Leu and Kinzler, 2000, p. 113). For the attainment of this end, a Unit Plan was carefully designed, bearing in mind a whole language approach to literary text with a focus on stylistic features, with particular attention to a student-centred, activity-based and task-oriented instruction (See Appendix).
- Second, lesson implementation and class observation.
- Third, feedback on the joint action research both by students, through the exploratory analysis of students’ open-ended questionnaires completed in their computer file at the end of the second session, together with our own findings.

One of the main goals of the lesson consists of making students aware of styles/voices (frequently mislabelled as “the author’s style”) in the worlds of discourse of the two extracts –Text A and Text B–

(Appendix, pp. v-vi), intentionally chosen from the same fictional work. Their tackling presupposes students' familiarity with stylistic concepts, text features and text awareness. The former are particularly striking in the two passages and/or points of entry selected from an English contemporary novel, *The Collector* (1963) by John Fowles, to be analysed without students' prior knowledge of author, period, and English language variety.

Yet, the close reading of extract A was followed by different activities, included in Task A on excerpt A (Unit Plan, Stages 1 and 2, Appendix, pp. i-iii), so as to avoid mechanical reading comprehension procedures, on the one hand, and, on the other, to promote interactive reading and peer and/or inter-group discussion. Students ended up realising that each layer of meaning, on which they were asked to concentrate, might be ways-in to the extract, consequently of paramount importance for the process of meaning-making.

Text A (Appendix, p. v), Miranda's diary entry though inserted further on in the novel (*The Collector*, p. 117) was presented first for its reader-friendly direct and familiar tone, as well as simple sentence structure, highly contrasting with Clegg's opening paragraphs in the novel, Text B (Appendix, p. vi). His confessional tone challenges the reader with ambiguous lexical choice, irregular sentence structure, paradoxical apologetic discourse, seeing that he has a dominant role in Miranda's outcome. Therefore his speech was only to be introduced in Stages 3 and 4 (Unit Plan, pp. iii-iv), corresponding to the second two-hour session. Drawing on stylistic aspects, it was up to the readers/students to infer about both the unusual situation in which the characters/narrators find themselves in, along with the odd relationship between them, and their psychological/emotional dilemmas.

PROCEDURE

At first, students were asked to access Text A followed by different activities (each of the five groups was assigned one and only activity) shown on their monitors: Activity 1.– Graphology; Activity 2.– Semantics; Activity 3.– Lexis; Activity 4.– Cohesion; Activity 5.– Function (See Unit Plan, Stage 1, Task A, Appendix, pp. i-ii). Reading the text should be envisaged by the readers as a problem-setting/problem-solving –a meaningful aesthetic guessing game– as students had to discuss within the group (3/4 students per group) so as to come with plausible

answers to get to a compromise. This was followed by a forum discussion on the various interpretations brought about the reading between the lines and concentrating on different layers of meaning, thus avoiding not only plot-centred reading but also a transmissionist instruction on text comprehension, “focused largely on students’ mastery in comprehending texts”, as extensively discussed in Susan Hynds’ *On the Brink* (1997, p. 57).

Likewise, dissimilar strategies underlie the selection of words/phrases to be omitted or analysed in each text. In short, we aimed at a constant reshuffling of attitudes, methodology, students’ taking notes, ground their choice and personal sharing, to be coupled by an engaging highly motivating students’ and lecturer’s reading aloud of both extracts. Also, issues related to mood setting and voice were finally disclosed by prosodic features, such as intonation, stress and rhythm. Similarly, text readability and accessibility depended on the selection of ways-in, key words for text interpretation, drawing mostly on semantics, morpho-syntax and grammar-translation (See Stages 2-3, Tasks B and C, Appendix, pp. iii-iv).

The choice of both Text A and Text B, i.e., the confrontation of two distinct worlds of discourse, proved to raise students’ curiosity, not only concerning the understanding of events but also of the singular relationship between the “I” (Clegg) and “the other” (Miranda) and vice versa. Students had the opportunity to expand their reading tastes towards contemporary fiction as they were keen to become involved, therefore speculating on the feelings, motivations and gender of the characters/narrators. Readers played a role in the worlds of discourse, mostly grounded on textual features: balancing between a fellow reader and a textual authority, that is between a participant and an observer (cf. Hynds, 1997, p. 57). In the same line, seeing through the language and its ideology contributed largely to students’ better understanding of the texts and fostered their critical reading of the world.

IMPACT AND FEASIBILITY: SOME REMARKS

Notwithstanding that the sessions were meant to become activity-oriented and students took and shared their personal notes in their files, the lecturer adopted a traditional approach up to the first part of the forum discussion in Stage 1 (Unit Plan, p. iii), doing the questioning, reading out the instructions and reshaping/proof-reading students’

notes. Students were guided in their turn-taking, yet coupled by a supportive positive reinforcement and building on their knowledge.

Soon students' open/receptive and attentive attitude solely depicted those who were presenting their interpretation to the class. Some students got lost in the way, showed less concentration skills and parallel talk also came up. In addition, a couple of students expressed some difficulties in identifying the layers of meaning required in Activities 1 to 3.— Graphology, Semantics and Lexis. As a consequence, the lecturer had to refer briefly to some definitions on stylistic concepts. At this point, she got aware of differing levels of concentration, participation, among students and changed her strategy. Instead of a spokesperson per group, all the students were invited to take part in the discussion so as to get committed to text understanding and appreciation. Hence, lecturer-generated questions were replaced by a critical pedagogy of literary reading enhanced by students' reading aloud and commenting on classmates' responses to the text regarding: gender issues, genre, voice, thematic link, period and function. At the time, their reading for pleasure made it easier to change the sequence of activities and students were immediately introduced to excerpt B (Unit Plan, Stage 3 - Text B, pp. iii-iv).

Once again the lecturer reshuffled the sequence of activities partly driven by students'/readers' curiosity, eagerness to uncover the focaliser's/Clegg's singular narrative, as well as their ever-growing involvement with the worlds of discourse and interaction with the literary text for a meaningful purpose. Students evidenced an ability to make intertextual connections drawing on background knowledge, personal experience and textual features.

The multimedia lab made it possible to build on the dynamic unfolding of activities, particularly at two distinct times: listening/watching some students' videotaped reading aloud and accessing the CD ROM to look for key/unfamiliar words offered in both excerpts. Concurrently, listening and speaking could not be excluded from literacy practices in the classroom, namely a focus between "ordinary conversational listening and literate listening", to borrow from James Cunningham's recent criticism on the increase of the availability of books recorded for listening, "either on tape or CD, including many more unabridged versions" (2000, p. 64).

With regards to significance of lexical choice and grammar in context, language learning and expanding lexis in context came up in a more natural way in the sense that the multimedia setting was not used

as a traditional language lab in which phonetics and phonology are practised in a technical way. Students had the chance to broaden their horizons with respects to unfamiliar settings mentioned in both Texts A and B while accessing to remote places (via the Web), such as the Natural History Museum (London), referred in Text B. In the same line, “boarding school” offered an instance to promote students’ language/culture interface for they learnt lexis in context bearing in mind language arbitrariness.

The reference to “Pale Clouded Yellow”, an etymological scientific-related phrase, up to that moment unknown to all students, unexpectedly led to other contextual associated meanings in students’ speaking and sharing of their findings. After retrieving and visualising the picture of this butterfly on the Internet, its yellow colour became, in their opinion, immediately associated with Miranda’s hair –blond– also related with Clegg’s description of it –“pale, silky, like burnet cocoons”. With regards to his hobby, “observations diary” [i.e., his etymological diary] offered another association with cocoon and butterfly. Clegg’s idiosyncratic use of language propelled the students into a whirlpool of associations, schemata and former readings in the same course (*A Maggot* had been studied during the same semester). In the process, students came up with the possibility of Texts A and B belonging to Fowles’ *The Collector*.

CONCLUSION

In this course, the English language was not seen as “the other”, the foreign with universal categories, to use the Foucauldian terminology, but explained by its similarities and differences from the students’ mother tongue. New dimensions came up in these EFL sessions: students’ commitment to the tasks, spirit of co-operation, responsibility and representativity, shared reading/listening improved discourse competence while respecting the other’s turn-taking.

As a matter of fact, research skills/internet skills become, in this context, complementary to a whole language approach, if not to reading as an integrated skill as we have shown in the current case study, to follow Cunningham’s claim that “in the future one is expected to advocate for performance assessments of student and employee abilities to locate and compile information of various kinds from the internet” (2000, p. 64).

Students claimed, for instance, that via the Internet they “can get aid quicker”; “can access more information in a shorter period of time... consult other libraries and sites where... other information” can be obtained. And they rightly concluded that it is “more important for our day life... very useful to work with it in the courses” and, after all, “not in a so boring conventional manner”.

Consequently, the majority of students could cope quite well with the activities and tasks carried out in class and stated that they “only had to follow the instructions given by the teacher”. In another case it was stated that it was very easy to work in the multimedia lab because of their “former knowledge of the computer” as a working tool as well as being already “familiarised with internet and CD Rom search”, considered “essential [skills] for any student”. So in case of difficulty or inaccessibility the teacher’s instruction, immediate prompting figure as an ever-present motivating and humanising issue.

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