A JOURNEY INTO THE FUTURE: USING SCI-FI STORIES WITH EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Reading and discussing literature allows students to interact with each other. Students can bring a personal, often unique, perspective to the class. The excitement of discovery between and among students and their teachers builds on that perspective when all students, including those learning English as a foreign language (EFL), read, discuss, analyze, and evaluate meaningful literary texts. Students enjoy learning and discussing their learning experiences when the classroom context is comfortable, challenging and meaningful. This paper presents responses in a science fiction course with some successful methods in eliciting EFL students' discussion. The paper concludes that using both film and text versions of science fiction stories can be useful devices in helping EFL students participate confidently in reading classes.

Literary texts and science fiction novels

Many reasons have been given to introducing literary texts into communicative language teaching. According to Collie and Slater (1987), literature offers valuable authentic material, cultural and language enrichment, and personal involvement. Carter and Long (1991) explain the same environment in three models: culture, language and personal growth. Each embraces a particular set of learning objectives for students. In addition to the provision of motivating material, literature also helps develop students' interactive abilities (Lazar 1993; Collins 1996). It has also been pointed out that the authenticity and seriousness of literary texts offer genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers and text-type dealing with non-trivial matters (Duffy and Maley 1990). Gilroy (1995) furthers that notion by claiming that because literary texts are open to multiple interpretations, they provide a ready-made opinion gap between one student's interpretation and another's which can be bridged by genuine interaction. Each interpretation highlights the enduring quality of literature as well as the fact that it can provide a convenient source of material for language teachers. In short, since reading is an important source of input, the reading of literature should not be delayed. When recommending and selecting literary works, the communicative teacher should aim at expanding the student's literary input, rather than contracting it. It is also important that
teachers, in aiming at communicative competence, fulfill the students’ desire to express their feelings and thoughts and their need to interact, not just to react, in the new language they acquire (Tarvin and Al-Arish 1990).

Literary reading can provide EFL students with the content at a level they can understand and “learners must also be given opportunities to develop strategies for interpreting language in actual use” (Littlewood 1981, p. 3). A content-based reading course is a worthwhile and stimulating experience for both students and teachers (Kasper 1994; Mundy 1996). The course allows focused discussions in detail on selected topics. Student feedback on such courses has been very positive. The content-based reading course helps forestall students’ frustration even when they face a large amount of academic reading material. Lazar (1996) proposes that when dealing with longer texts, such as novels, teachers’ analysis of language should be more general. For instance, an analysis of the narrative structure in a novel can enhance students’ knowledge of tenses and adverbs of time. Given book sales and library circulation figures for science fiction, these novels will likely comprise a significant amount of voluntary reading. Fuchs (1987) suggests that teachers select books for young people that reflected the actual interests of adolescents.

It has been pointed out that knowledge of the poetics and appreciation of the archetypal literary relationships of science fiction could develop and allow students to experience certain qualities: critical reading and thinking skills, standards of values, and a sense of connection with conventional literature. Hirvela (1989, 1990) believes that the science fiction context gives students an immediate sense of relevance, which is essential to promoting their interest. The texts integrate science concerns and ideas with real-life contexts. The stories provide students with an interesting and useful blend of scientific and emotive language. “The combination of language varieties helped develop the students’ communicative capacity by bringing them in contact with both the scientific register they must master and other registers which constitute the discourse of daily life” (Hirvela 1990, p. 245).

Science fiction films and their corresponding texts can facilitate opinion sharing and critical discussion on their course readings. Watching movies and reading texts allow students to investigate devices such as appearance, reality, poetic justice, and parallel protagonist/antagonist characterizations— as well as the emergence of female, ethnic, minority, and alternative lifestyle characters as a reflection of changing social assumptions. Students also share the love of science fiction for its ability to transport them to other times and places.

With the above points in mind, I present two class responses to the discussion of the themes of “dystopia” and “robotics and sexuality” through two science fiction
stories and three films. Activities include listening to oral and recorded materials, asking questions, and working in small groups. Through these activities, students experience the communicative nature of language. Only widespread involvement in language can motivate students’ reading and participating in class (Moffet and Wagner 1983; Carr 1995; Wallace 1995).

The class

I taught two science fiction classes for two consecutive terms in a university in Hong Kong in 2000. The course was a university language elective course, which aimed to enhance students’ English language proficient. Most students attending this course were first year students from different departments. The first term I taught the course, I approached it with traditional methods: asking students to read the text before class and I lectured away, explaining the images and significance of passages during class time. It turned out to be a mistake with most of my students who had no training in literature before. Worst of all, I started with Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, which was far too difficult for students who had not even read any novel in English. The enrollment dropped drastically in the first three weeks.

I used a more down-to-earth approach when I offered the course again. Three students dropped out right after the first class, but I had 33 students (17 male, 10 female) with me to the end of the term. The major revision of the course was the application of movies for class discussion. Film and television can help enlarge experience and supply vocabulary (Greenwood 1989; Aix 1988). If these options can be used to strengthen the basic competencies which students are expected to develop through reading, they will play a valuable instructional role (Collins 1996). I also made use of a lot of small groups discussion. Language scholars affirm that skills required for comprehending texts, like identifying the main idea, recalling details, relating facts, drawing conclusions, and predicting outcomes are operations that apply to activities in life (Moffett and Wagner 1983). Students need to hear other viewpoints about a text and compare them to their own thinking. When a reader finds out that others read a text differently, that reader may realize that his/her interpretation was limited by a subjective view. Decreasing egocentricity is necessarily for improving student performance in reading (Collins 1996).

In-class discussion

Students in the second batch were asked to watch the movie Matrix (1999) first. I explained the terms “virtual reality”: and “dystopia” to students. I also asked students to read the beginning chapters of Brave New World (1932), and be ready for discussion in the second class meeting. Discussion questions were delivered for
students to consider when watching the movie and reading the novel, for example:

1. What is the theme of *Matrix*? Why is Neo so determined to save the world at the end of the movie?
2. Does the first paragraph in Chapter 1 of *Brave New World* sound like proper English? What is missing? What messages does the author convey?
3. In what ways are we conditioned in our society, just as people are conditioned in *Brave New World*?

Knowing the shyness and “reserved-ness” of Chinese students who seldom take the initiative in discussion (Pennington et al. 1992; Flowerdew & Miller 1995, 1996), in the second class meeting, I divided the class into eight groups, about four students in each group. Each group member had to pick a number from one to five, without repeating the number. Then I told the students that the number they had picked represented the question number above, that is, each student would discuss one question and share his/her opinion with the members in the group. This method allowed students to concentrate on one question only, but receive input from the other members in the group even when they had no comments for them. The solo presentation became heated debates within groups, for students felt more comfortable chatting in English with a small number of people in English than with the whole class.

At the same time, I gave out a piece of paper to each group, asking all the students to write their names; the papers remained with the groups. After circulating among groups and monitoring progress for some time, I stopped the discussion. I told the class that they had to earn their participation grade (20% of the course grade). The paper with names served a dual purpose: it was for taking attendance on the one hand, and allowing me to put a check next to the name of the student who had commented critically and sensibly on an issue on the other.

I asked if anyone wanted to answer the questions and, of course, none did. After a pause, I appointed some groups to answer the questions. I kept reminding students that they had to earn their participation grade. After three students had bravely provided satisfactory answers and I put checks next to their names, the rest of the class eagerly raised their hands, hoping to be called upon. I was surprised to hear some unexpected but highly sophisticated answers. For example, when we discussed the question about “conditioning”, one student commented that “conditioning” might not be a bad idea at all, although the phenomenon in *Brave New World* was clearly unacceptable. He commented that the “check-awarding” approach I was using to encourage participation was a form of conditioning and it seemed to be working. Another student agreed. He commented that initially he just wanted the check, but
once he got into the discussion, he really wanted to comment on some issues and rebut others’ opinions.

Students were also asked to compare the class system of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon in *Brave New World* with the secondary school banding/streaming system in Hong Kong (band 1 being the best, band 5 the weakest), and they were asked to comment on how good these systems were. This question brought home memories to everyone in class for all the students had been through the banding system. However, comments were divided into two camps. One camp believed that secondary school students in Hong Kong should not be labeled by the banding because the weakest students would lose face and confidence in learning. Another camp disagreed and said that if students wanted to be promoted to a better banding, they could do so through hard work, unlike the situation in the World State in *Brave New World*, where people were conditioned and would not know the need for advancement. I was happy with the discussion and moved onto the mini-lecture I had prepared for the novel.

After reading *Brave New World*, I had students read a short story “The Bicentennial Man” by Isaac Asimov (1976) for the next meeting. Although the movie version (1999) is substantially different from the text, students were asked to watch it, and to compare and contrast the notions of “robotic personality” and “sexuality” in both versions. In addition, students were asked to watch *Terminator 2: The Judgment Day* (1990). In the next class, discussion revolved around three issues: the future world in both the movies, the robotic behavior and personality of Andrew, the robotic protagonist, in both the text and movie versions of “The Bicentennial Man” with reference to the “Three Laws of Robotics”, and the sexual images in *Terminator 2*.

The comments given to the first issue were casual and bland; students responded that the directors, when creating the future world, were trying to suit the taste of the audience a decade apart. Since the course was not a film one *per se*, I decided to leave it at that. Students agreed unanimously that although the plots of the text and movie versions of “The Bicentennial Man” were different, Andrew’s robotic behavior and personality were basically the same; only perhaps the movie version was more humanized when an American comedian (Robin Williams) was playing the part. Students found that it was more interesting to read the text than watch the movie because the former allowed more scope for imagination.

The discussion on sexuality promoted much heated debates among these young adults. With reference to *Terminator 2*, students had no problem seeing the power struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist, and between the two sexes. Students described the phallic symbols vividly, citing the cigar, the snooker cues,
and the antagonist’s elongated finger-cum-knife. They failed, however, to see symbols representing women.

My background in Edgar Allan Poe and knowledge in psychology came into play. I directed students to two scenes where the character discussed “crying”. A few students associated crying with a female emotional act. They explained that from childhood, males were asked not to cry even in the worst situation and when they got hurt, “because you are a boy.” They further explained that was why most of the tough characters wore sunglasses, so that others could not see their eyes. I had to admit that both points were well delivered. I borrowed Hoffman’s discussion on “eye” in most Poe’s stories. Hoffman (1972) suggested that eyes had a lubricating system and covers which open and close by a will of their own, thus resembling a woman’s vagina (the finger-cum-knife piercing through a victim’s eye was seen several times in Terminator 2). These comments provoked giggles among students; it was after all a bold move to openly discuss the function of male and female genitals. I could see some unease among students, but I urged them to maintain a scholastic mentality because they needed it for discussing Margaret Atwood’s The Handmade’s Tale (1986), where we would continue discussions on abortion, genders, and sexuality.

The other three texts I used for the course were Contact, Postman, and Frankenstein. Although I had had problems using Frankenstein the first time I offered the course, I felt obliged to use it again for I felt that it is after all the first science fiction novel. Now I use it last with the second batch; students in this class found the book much easier than the first batch had, probably because the second batch had read five other works already, while the first batch had been haunted by Shelly’s diction.

Conclusion

Space does not permit lengthy discussion on the detail of each class meeting, but I think it is fair to say that the overall outcome of the second batch was more than satisfactory. No doubt, science fiction stories are a rich source of classroom activities that can prove very motivating for students. They provide examples of human dilemma, conflict, and yearning. They draw out strong emotional reactions from students. Unraveling the plot of a novel is more than a mechanical exercise—EFL students become more personally involved in the process of language learning; they begin to own the language and will learn more thoroughly (Lazar 1996). Literature provides students with a rich ground of authentic materials over a wider range of registers; students can gain access to this material by developing literary competence and they should effectively internalize and eventually own the language. Students will be able to apply the language skills learnt in this course
when they are provided with ample opportunities for reading academic texts. They will have a thorough understanding of the need of the interactive process.

References


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