Improving Language Skills Through Literature

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"The study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation" (Moody 1971:22), and tasks set in the study of literature can lead to practice and improvement in all language skills. The purpose of this article is to show how language skills can be practiced in the literature class. I shall describe and give examples of work arising from the different kinds of tasks set for a class in which I teach a number of different texts, including plays, novels, and short stories.

All tasks demand at least some groupwork. They also depend on the students having *read* the text before coming to the first class session. Students who have not done this the first time very quickly rectify the omission by the second session because their ignorance is revealed in the group.

The students whom I have taught and from whom I have examples of work done are first-year students at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. These students have been selected on the basis of their results in the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), which is equivalent to the British "O" Level examination. However, I feel the tasks set are equally appropriate for senior secondary classes (grades 10-12). I have, in fact, advised student teachers to use such techniques in secondary school literature classes. (Literature is a compulsory component of the MSCE English examination, which all students must pass to obtain the MSCE Certificate.) These student teachers' reports and my own observations of them teaching literature classes in grade 11 confirm my feelings.

Synopsis Writing

The first task I set the students is to write a synopsis of the text to be studied. After all, summary writing is a skill tested in many, if not all, language examinations, and synopsis is basically a summary of the plot. Furthermore, it is useful for the students to have a synopsis of any literature text they are studying, in the event that they have to sit for a literature examination, as they do in Malawi, so as to save time when revising.

The first time I introduce this task to the class, we examine together some notes on what a synopsis should contain and the synopses given in McCrimmon (1963:192-195). The students then have to write the synopsis of the text they are studying. They do not, however, practice the writing skill on their own, but in groups of six or seven. Each group is assigned to write a synopsis of one section, be it one short story in an anthology, one scene or act of a play, or a group of chapters in a novel.

When the different groups have finished their synopses of different sections of the text (within the same hour), these are typed up on stencil, uncorrected, in time for the next class session. Here is part of the synopsis of the first scene of *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka (1964), as produced by one of three groups in a class of 19 students:

Morning

Scene opens with Lakunle, a school master, teaching little children arithmetic in class. Sidi the most beautiful girl in

the village passes by. Lakunle stops teaching and goes after her. The two start talking and in the course of their conversation the following conflicts arise:

(1) Why Sidi was carrying a pail on her head

(2) She had dressed so shabbily

(3) Lakunle is despised because he is a teacher

(4) Lakunle is not accepted in the village because he is influenced by modern culture

(5) Lakunle does not agree on bride price whereas Sidi insists that if Lakunle wants her as a wife, he should first pay the bride price . . .

After being told by her friends of the beautiful images from the book brought by the stranger and that the Bale was jealous of her, Sidi becomes more proud as she gains popularity. She regards everyone else in the village less important than herself. She gets very excited and organises a dance of the lost traveller. Lakunle is given the part of the drunkard stranger. Everything comes to a stop as Baroka appears and accuses Lakunle of trying to steal the village maidenhead - Sidi . . . . . .

During this second session, the students read the synopses for the sections of the text they have not prepared, as well as the one they prepared themselves. So as to encourage *critical* reading, I tell the students to get into the same groups as the first class session, to discuss whether they have left anything important out from their own synopsis and to evaluate the completeness and usefulness of the other groups' synopses. They are told to make any changes they feel necessary on the duplicated sheets. This reading and revision takes about 20 minutes for a play or a couple of short stories, but may take a full hour or more for a novel.

We then make time, as a class, to go through all groups' synopses and I point out any errors in grammar or choice of vocabulary, and any misunderstandings of the plot, either for the remaining 40 minutes of the class or in the next class session. For example, in the above extract, the students had problems of which tense to use, and also did not always choose their words carefully enough (for instance, *shabbily* when they meant *immodestly*) They also suggested that Lakunle was accused of stealing Sidi, when what they meant was the stranger (acted by Lakunle). All such problems, whether of grammar, vocabulary, or literal or inferential comprehension of the text, can be sorted out quickly. The final step in the period is to discuss aspects of plot structure, including conflict, suspense, and denouement (Abrams 1981:137- 140, S. Chimombo 1982). This follow-up to the groupwork, which can be done as in a more traditional type of literature class, either by lecture or by questioning and class discussion, is essential to ensure accurate understanding of the text

Character Study

The second task, which may also be done in groups, but may be done individually if the teacher wishes, is character study. As with the synopsis of the text, I have each group studying a different character, but this time answering preset questions such as these:

(a) How are we introduced to this character? What is our first impression of this person? Illustrate with quotations, or examples, how this person behaves at the beginning of the play or novel (Sheal 1981:26-27)

The questions cover the aspects of character mentioned by Abrams (1981:20-22): development, traits, motivation, etc. Here is part of one group's character study of Sadiku (in *The Lion and the Jewel*) in which are answered the above questions:

> We are introduced to Sadiku as an old clever woman who is trying to win Sidi for Baroka. She is Baroka's head wife. Our first impression of this woman is that she is persuasive and very clever as she says, "Sidi have you considered ...life of bliss awaits you?"..."Your place will always be in the palace. (*sic*) Other characters like Sidi see her as a cunning woman....

Again, each group's character study is typed up and duplicated for distribution to every member of the class, discussed in groups, and corrected for grammatical errors as well as misrepresentations by the class as a whole.

As a class, we also work on paragraphing, including topic sentences and the order of sentences within paragraphs. But my main concern in this task is with the form that quotations from a literature text (or any text, for that matter) must take, how to incorporate quotations into the text of an essay, and how to document properly when quoting from any text. For example, the students who produced the above character study did not pay attention to the syntax of the extracts they wished to cite in support of their observations, nor did they follow the conventions for citing an extract longer than three lines, nor did they indicate the page number from which the quote was taken.

Although it is not obvious from the above extract from the character study, the students also failed to give at the end of their paper the full reference to the text being studied. I have found that making them get into the habit of writing footnotes and bibliography entries for one-page papers in literature, where more often than not at the first-year level they are only citing one text, helps them grasp the basics of footnote and bibliography writing before being confused by the great many variations of citation format both within one style, from journal article to short story within an anthology to a translation of a Greek play, and across different styles. Such details as citation and documentation formats need to be taught, not in an abstract way by examining how other people have done it, but by having students work on their own writing.

Making Comparisons

The third task, which may also be done either individually or in groups, is that of making comparisons, a task which is frequently required not only in literature but in many other fields of study. For example, comparisons can be made of two characters within one text, such as Antigone and Ismene or Creon and Haemon in Sophocles' *Antigone* (1947), or theme and setting of two short stories may be constrasted, such as "Tekayo" by Grace Ogot (1981) and "Too Strange Not To Be True" by Cuthbert Khunga (1965). Sometimes the teacher may wish all individuals or groups to undertake the same comparison or contrast, but on other occasions he/she may prefer them to undertake different ones.

I find that giving groups the task of developing an outline for an essay demanding comparison and contrast helps them not only brainstorm for the ideas but also work on aspects such as the organization of the ideas, and strategies for writing an essay demanding comparison and contrast. Having worked together in groups to prepare the outline, the students then discuss the topic as a class. This class discussion is summarized on the chalkboard, dividing the board into two, one side for each of the two aspects to be compared. Thus,

for example, the comparison of setting in the above two short stories led to the following outline:

"Tekayo"

Physical
Lakeshore village in Nyasaland (Malawi before independence)
Season
Dry season

"Too Strange Not To Be True"

Physical
Village in semi-arid area, near jungle, in Sudan
Season
Beginning of short rains

The next step is for students to draft their essays individually. Lastly, prior to handing in their final copy, they have the opportunity to work on their introductions and conclusions and topic sentences of paragraphs, again in the same groups. Thus group work in literature forms the basis for some extensive work on developing writing skills.

A greater awareness of words and the power of language can be developed by close study of two short stories in which aspects of style and/or language are either strikingly similar or strikingly different, for example, "Too Strange Not To Be True" by Cuthbert Khunga (1965) and "Waiting for a Turn" by Ken Kipenga (1981). In other words, this is another exercise demanding comparison and contrast, but of a somewhat different kind. I find that students have great difficulty identifying stylistic aspects of a text, and being made to notice differences between two texts appears to help them later to see aspects of style in one text independent of another. Every group, pair, or individual studies the same two short stories for this task. They are required to identify in each text, for example, sentence patterns (under Style in Abrams 1981:190-192), figurative language (Abrams 1981:63-66), and point of view (Abrams 1981:142-145), prior to looking for similarities and differences. A particularly effective way of heightening their awareness of aspects of an author's style is use of a modified cloze procedure in which key words are deleted from a significant passage in the work being studied (cf. Rye 1982:99-100). Here is an example of such a passage (I have indicated the exact omitted word for ease of reference):

Instructions

Read the following extracts from Ken Lipenga's "Waiting for a Turn" *carefully. Certain words have been omitted, one word from each space. Try to work out what word the author originally put in that space. In your groups, discuss the reasons you think the author may have had for choosing that particular word:*

All roads lead to Sapitwa. All (*traffic*) moves towards Sapitwa. Rivers (*criss-cross*) and point in different (*directions*). But all rivers flow (*into*) Sapitwa pool. Tears of (*laughter*) and tears of sorrow (*flow*) into Sapitwa pool. All (*enemies*) meet and shake hands at (*Sapitwa*)...

All roads lead to (*Sapitwa*). All traffic (*roars*) towards Sapitwa. Rivers criss-cross and (*point*) in different directions. But (*all*) rivers flow into Sapitwa (*pool*). Blood sweat and (*tears*) flow into Sapitwa pool. The (*wind*) blows all fires towards (*Sapitwa*). All (*roads*) lead to Sapitwa. Deadly (*enemies*) seal their (*mouths*) with the sap of the (*kachere*) tree and swear (*never*) to talk to each other. But (*all*) enemies meet and (*shake*) hands at Sapitwa....

Although they are not expected to write down their observations in essay form but simply to report back to the whole class from notes, their heightened awareness of language helps them in choice of vocabulary in particular and in essay writing in general,

as well as the immediate task of learning to appreciate an author's style.

Debates

Finally, debates may be conducted on motions arising from themes in the literature texts studied. These debates are probably best prepared for in groups, so as to avoid weak arguments which are poorly supported by quotations from the text. For example, some groups may prepare arguments supporting the motion while others prepare arguments opposing it. Then those groups that have prepared the former arguments have to compare their notes and select the proposer and seconder, and likewise those opposed to the motion put together their arguments and select an opposer and seconder. Having prepared in this way, students are more likely to argue effectively.

In order to make sure that everybody is involved, even during the debate itself, the final assignment should be to write an essay, either supporting or opposing the motion, or if preferred, presenting both sides of the argument. One such debate I organized, as a final lesson on Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1968), was on the motion, "This house believes that Mugo deserved to die," but other motions similarly phrased are also possible, such as on Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Muthoni in Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965), or Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone* (1947).

Advantages

In all the above tasks, students are working on language skills while studying literature. In any task demanding group work, for instance, they are given vital practice in both speaking and listening in the process of arguing over what to include and what to exclude in their write-up of the assignment, be it a synopsis, a character study or any of the other tasks suggested, for a period of almost one hour. It also gives them the opportunity to show their sense of responsibility to the rest of the class, not only to their own learning, because each group's work is generally essential for the other groups.

The third language skill they get extensive practice in is reading. Obviously, they have to have read the literature text which is being studied, as a preliminary to any of the other tasks. But they also have to read critically and evaluate their classmates' written work, such as synopses and character studies, because this work is also essential for them to have a complete picture of the text being studied and to be ready to be examined on that text. Their comprehension of the text is revealed in their ability both to notice omissions or misrepresentations in their classmates' work and to express themselves adequately and accurately, orally and in writing, in the course of all the tasks.

Lastly, they are also required to practice extensively the most difficult of language skills, writing. Sometimes the write-up is a communal effort, on other occasions it is the result of individual work, but the written work always gives the students the opportunity to see and discuss their errors, of grammar and structure, of content, and of organization. Detailed work is possible on outlining strategies, paragraph structure, including topic sentences, introductory and concluding paragraphs, overall essay presentation, and documentation skills.

Clearly, the literature class provides a great many opportunities for intensive practice in all four language skills, and as such the study of literature can justifiably be kept as a component of any language course. Furthermore, a greater understanding of the literature texts being studied may be achieved than by the lecture method, because the students are actively involved in their own interpretation of texts. They cannot be passive.

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