

# Using a Literary Text in the Language Classroom

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Language learning and language teaching at a university level should examine language as a system and probe into its deep structures. This involves putting together a puzzle, or, perhaps, taking the puzzle apart and finding out why certain pieces fit together. English, being an analytical language, has a fixed structure with basic patterns; the Germanic-origin structural words form its backbone and serve as arrows or signs which point to these basic patterns embedded in its deep structures. The analytic process from Indo-European to Modern English, which passed through Common Germanic, West Germanic, Anglo-Frisian, Old English, and Middle English, has been one of simplification and inflexion deletion (Potter 1950). In the words of Pound (1979:50):

The great break in European literary history is the changeover from inflected to uninflected language. And a great deal of critical nonsense has been written by people who did not realize the difference.

.....  
It makes a difference in English whether you say *man sees dog* [or] *dog sees man*.

In Latin either *canis* or *canem*, or *homo* or *hominem* can come first without the sentence being the least bit ambiguous.

All words have a particular function. The ancient Greeks knew this and gave us a terminology for the parts of speech as well as defining the study of patterns as *syntax* (from the Greek meaning *ordering together, systematic arrangement*). By taking language apart we individualize the parts, but when we put it back together again we find that each part has its own particular space to fill so as to form a sentence and convey a particular message.

The sentence, then, is the main unit of speech. It is a minimum free form like a word but usually combines two or more free forms in the SVO (subject-verb-object) order. Therefore, a sentence can be compared to a completed puzzle, a structure, in which words are the pieces that make it up.

In the case of English, the structure is fixed and rule-dependent, universally accepted by the community. And, as Chomsky (1957) has illustrated, "the rules are structure dependent and only structure dependent." If the rules are not obeyed, the structure is distorted and consequently

the message can be either ambiguous, erroneous, or even incomprehensible.

The use of a literary text (or so-called "set book") in a course at university level can be extremely helpful in studying the unchangeable structures of the English language. In this light we see not only the beauty of language but the underlying mechanisms that are functioning to form an intricate whole. If, as according to Robert Frost, literature is a "performance in words," then we are indeed the actors and our performance is based on a script (structure) that makes up a play (system). As food for thought, I would like to dish out what can happen during an English language course (average 60 hours) based on a literary text, according to my experience in the university classroom. I will deal with *what* (subject matter) can be tackled and also *how* (techniques) to tackle it.

Starting from the titles of some contemporary novels:

*A Few Green Leaves*

*Family and Friends*

*The Edible Woman*

*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

*Looking for Ammu*

we can analyze several grammatical points such as (1) determiners; (2) nouns and noun phrases; (3) adjective order; (4) coordination; and (5) prepositions.

## Determiners

Determiners are signs placed to the left of nouns and indicate their presence in a noun phrase (NP). If we take the title of Margaret Atwood's novel:

*The Edible Woman*

which can be linguistically translated:

DETERMINER    ADJECTIVE    NOUN

it gives us a pattern that will be repeatedly used either in subjective or objective positions. Here a whole theoretical study of noun phrases can be embarked on and learners can delve into the depths of linguistic competence.

Language can also be used for its own sake, without any real referent but itself. This aspect makes English a closed system and can be illustrated through "nonsense." Nonsense words can be used in

fixed patterns so that learners get accustomed to singling out specific structures and relying on the rules of the system. In a noun phrase, something like the following could be used:

a    thonk       zerfen       kes  
and converted into Atwood's words in chapter 4 of *The Edible Woman*:

a    thick       golden       haze

A challenging classroom (and also exam) technique is that of cloze exercises, or passages where words are deliberately taken out and students must fill in the blanks based on their knowledge of syntactic structures. There are, of course, various answers but all of them must necessarily fall into specific linguistic categories. In the case of determiners, why not eliminate all the ones included in a particular passage and see how many different ones can be used and why? I propose the following example taken again from *The Edible Woman* (ch. 30):

Sponge or angel-food? she wondered. She decided on sponge. It was more fitting.

She turned on (1) . . . oven. That was (2) . . . part of (3) . . . kitchen that had not been overrun by (4) . . . creeping skin-disease covering of dirt, mostly because they hadn't been using it much recently. She tied on (5) . . . apron and rinsed (6) . . . new bowls and (7) . . . other new utensils under (8) . . . tap, but did not disturb (9) . . . of (10) . . . dirty dishes. Later for them. Right now she didn't have time. She dried (11) . . . things and began to crack and separate (12) . . . eggs, hardly thinking, concentrating (13) . . . (14) . . . attention on (15) . . . movements of (16) . . . hands, and then when she was beating and sifting and folding, on (17) . . . relative times and (18) . . . textures. Sponge cake needed (19) . . . light hand. She poured (20) . . . batter into (21) . . . tin and drew (22) . . . fork sideways through it to break (23) . . . large air bubbles. As she slid (24) . . . tin into (25) . . . oven she almost hummed with pleasure. It was (26) . . . long time since she had made (27) . . . cake.

## Nouns and noun phrases

In the title *A Few Green Leaves* (Barbara Pym) there is a noun with the inflexional morpheme "s," which is used to form the plural. The spelling rule for forming the plural of words ending in *-f* and *-fe* is *>-ves*, save some exceptions. A look into morphophonemics provides learners with relevant constant features on the fundamental link between English pronunciation and grammar. In fact, the morpheme *-s*, used for the formation of plurals, Saxon genitive, conjugation of the third-person present singular form, short form of "is" and "has," is often omitted by Italian speakers and by doing so there is a loss not only in accuracy but even in comprehension. A dictation exercise using the allomorphs /iz, s, z/ provides useful practice. Students can make three columns according to the three allomorphs and while listening (twice) to a text read by the teacher or on a cassette, they take the words down in the appropriate columns. For example (ch. 26):

That same morning, on the outskirts of Birmingham, Daphne was taking Bruce to the vet. The scene in the surgery waiting room was very different from the hushed atmosphere at the doctor's, with nobody speaking to anybody. Here there was a friendly air and anxious, even searching, inquiry into the ailments and troubles of the patients, cradled in their owners' arms or shrouded in baskets and boxes on the urine-stained carpet (the result of a nervous animal forgetting itself). Neutering and spaying, the best treatment for worms, the various injections against cat flu, distemper, and hard pad were all fit subjects of conversation, eagerly discussed.

When Daphne's turn came, she found that she was seeing the youngest of the vets . . .

"Come on, Bruce," she said, "let the doctor take your paw."

The vet laughed. "Funny, my name's Bruce too," he said.

It seemed to create a bond between them and she felt almost as if she really *had* confided her worries to him. But all she said was what a shame it was the way you were always seeing notices ev-

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everywhere about dogs not being welcome in places. Bruce was so well behaved, would never do anything he ought not to. Not like a cat.

/iz/	/s/	/z/
boxes	outskirts	doctors'
notices	ailments	troubles
places	patients	owners'
	baskets	arms
	subjects	worms
	vets	injections
		Daphne's
		name's
		worries
		dogs

### Adjective order

Adjective order cannot be taken for granted and here again we can go back to the basic pattern Det. + Adj. + Noun. An example of a more elaborate noun phrase from Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (ch. 3) provides motivation for discovering the order of adjectives included between the determiner and the noun:

the coast-to-coast instant pudding-sauce study  
This decoding-recoding process is a trip behind the scenes of language itself and other than being worthwhile, can also be challenging and fun.

A whole myriad of dictation exercises can add to the reinforcement of basic patterns. When using a literary text, the teacher can choose passages that s/he thinks include the topic(s) under discussion. When dealing with noun phrases and adjective order, a gap dictation like the following could be used (phrases in italics are to be blanked out):

"Marian," she said, "we have (1) *a little problem*. We're running (2) *a beer study* next week—you know which one, it's (3) *the telephone-thing one*—and they've decided upstairs that we need to do (4) *a pre-test* this weekend."

(5) *The initial selection questions* were standard enough. After that, the questions were designed to test listener response to (6) *a radio jingle*, part of (7) *the advertising campaign* for (8) *a new brand of beer* one of (9) *the large companies* was about to launch on the market. At (10) *a certain point* the interviewer

had to ask the respondent to pick up the telephone and dial (11) *a given number*, whereupon the jingle would play itself to him over the phone. Then there were (12) *a number of questions* asking the man how he liked the commercial, whether he thought it might influence (13) *his buying habits*, and so on.

I remembered the sketches I'd seen of (14) *the visual presentation*, scheduled to appear in magazines and on posters: the label was to have (15) *a pair of antlers with a gun and a fishing rod* crossed beneath them. (16) *The singing commercial* was a reinforcement of this theme; I didn't think it was very original but I admired the subtlety of "just (17) *plain old-fashioned relaxing*." That was so (18) *the average beer-drinker, the slope-shouldered pot-bellied kind*, would be able to feel (19) *a mystical identity* with (20) *the plaid-jacketed sportsman* shown in the pictures with his foot on a deer or scooping a trout into his net. (ch. 3)

Dictation, an accuracy-based language-learning technique, challenges the learner's short term memory. Cloze exercises are also accuracy based and challenge the learner's L<sub>2</sub> competence. Whenever a real challenge is involved, the learner tends to panic; what is expected from him/her is a question of his/her knowledge of the language. This sense of panic may be translated into anxiety and/or fear that distort the learner's performance. Therefore, learners are usually "frightened" when faced with these techniques, especially when they are used as testing ones.

### Coordination

What about coordination? Various phrases or clauses can be linked together by using the coordinators *and*, *but*, *or*. In Anita Brookner's title *Family and Friends*, *and* simply connects the two nouns and establishes some kind of relationship between them. *And* usually indicates a relationship between similar things, *but* between opposites, and *or* an alternative, so that different connotations are evoked depending on the coordinator. Consider

the following excerpts from this novel of Brookner's:

Frederick in his linen jacket *and* his panama hat *and* his pale shoes, smiling *and* strolling *and* savouring his pleasures (ch. 14).

*But* for Frank, who turns up every morning in time to take Betty out to lunch *and* who will stay with her all day, being unable to think of anywhere else to go, *and* who will be with her all night if she wants him, *and* who will, in all this time, wear a sunny *and* slightly puzzled smile, *and* will long to tell her of some family holiday in the distant past *or* some anecdote about his married sister, *but* who is quite used to being ignored, Betty has little sympathy *and* less *and* less patience. (ch. 7)

At a university level, probing into the theory behind coordination means that the teacher will find him/herself embroiled in detailed matters like syndetic/asyndetic coordination, ellipsis, intonation, punctuation, apposition, and consequently, subordination. Why not get involved?

## Prepositions

And while on the subject of getting involved in sticky issues, there are more than 100 prepositions in English that deserve careful attention. "One of the most common errors that people learning English make is to use the wrong preposition" (Sinclair 1991). Let's take a look at the opening paragraph of Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*:

Mary Fisher lives in a High Tower, on the edge of the sea; she writes a great deal **about** the nature of love. She tells lies.

Here the prepositions *in* and *on* relate to space; *of* and *about* link noun phrases together and indicate what you are talking about. I have just used *about* to explain *about*; this goes to show that most sentences in English include a preposition. In the above example, the prepositions could be eliminated without hindering comprehension but if erroneous ones replaced them, meaning would be distorted (and even comical):

Mary Fisher lives **on/through/over** a High Tower, **inside/with** the edge **by/underneath/on top** of the sea; she writes a great

deal **with/thanks to** the nature **beyond/without** love. She tells lies.

Error correction exercises are often used in testing. They require an accurate performance based on a sound L<sub>2</sub> competence. Classroom exercises dealing with errors liven up the atmosphere, bring in laughter, and give a sense of relaxation—a useful combination for good language teaching and learning.

Prepositions also add "color" to verbs, forming the so-called phrasal verbs. The title of Claire Macquet's novel, *Looking for Ammu* is an example and implies a search, a hunt, a detective story. The title would indicate something very different if the preposition were *at*, *around*, *over*, or *to*, just to mention a few other possibilities. Teacher-learner classroom reflection and discussion on phrasal verbs can help permanently fix these mnemonic-learned structures.

There are an infinite number of things that can be done with language and writers are, of course, continuously experimenting with it. In the language classroom, manipulating the system by decoding-recoding techniques provides a theoretic launching pad from where learners themselves are free to explore the mysteries and beauties of the puzzling world of the English language.

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