

TOWARDS AN INTERFACE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of being simplified in style, structure and vocabulary for schematic presentation, most EFL texts are not only limited in context, but they are also unauthentic, which is the reason why the potential for 'deep processing' usually happens to be limited. According to Widdowson, a simplified text does not "realise the meaning potential of language to create alternative contexts of reality; it simply manifests language usage, puts it on show disposed in a way that makes minimal demands on thoughts" (Widdowson, 1984: 169). There is no denying the fact that there are advantages in using simplified texts for pedagogical purposes, as they make the L2 more accessible by stages and increase students' exposure to it. Nevertheless, if we want our students to become language users, they need to be introduced to texts in their complete original versions, instead of being exposed to mainly simplified texts (Chan, 1999). That is the reason why the author of this article thinks that both kinds of texts (simplified and original ones) should form a part of the intermediate level of foreign language learning.

By using the chosen text our intention is to boost students' language awareness, in other words, their knowledge, perception and attitude of the nature and function of language. Although the real influence of awareness on foreign language learning has been a controversial issue, several studies like those of Leow (1997) and Schmidt (1990), to name but two of them, have clearly shown that awareness has a facilitative role in this process, which is why it can be considered that the focus-on-form and the focus-on-meaning approaches are not exclusive, but rather they must be worked on together. It should be remembered that even in natural language acquisition contexts, which guarantee sufficient quantity of input, complete formal accuracy is unlikely to be achieved without any focus on form. If we want our students to reflect on language, this has to be carried out within the framework of text production and comprehension, taking into consideration the circumstances surrounding the communicative context as well as the grammatical and textual rules. That is the reason why choosing the right text is of the utmost importance, since it must be included in a wider project or set of objectives (Lasagabaster, 1999a).

Literary texts are among those kinds of texts which best help to develop language awareness among EFL students. I do not refer to just the canonical works with a big or capital 'L', the so-called classics, but rather to what Carter and Nash referred to as 'literariness' in

1990, which is found in varying degrees in almost all texts, since most of them show an attempt on the part of the writer to create some literary, aesthetic effect by manipulating the language. Hence, the focus of analysis shifts from the text as a given product to the dynamic process of creation and reception (Chan, 1999).

As I have just mentioned, literature is obviously not just limited to the classics and there are many texts which could prove very captivating for the students and at the same time serve our teaching purposes. This leads us to the immediate rejection of the idea that literary texts are written in a difficult language that hinders students' enjoyment of them (Prieto Pablos, 1992). It is one of the aims of this paper to show an example which does away with these prevalent thoughts. Since the dichotomy between language and literature has no solid foundations, we, as teachers of a foreign language, should ask ourselves how we can do best to help our students to read texts at a variety of levels of meaning.

The selected literary text must first of all be appealing for the learners, so that its reading becomes a joyful activity and not just a piece of work. Brumfit (1985) states that it should provoke the learners' reaction without the teacher's intervention. In this way their reaction can later be guided but on no account should it be imposed by the teacher. Similarly, the language used in the text should be in accordance with the students' command of the English language. Otherwise we may run the risk of a withdrawal on the part of the students due to the complexity of the text, which would put them off reading the set text carefully.

I will therefore endeavour to illustrate how language awareness can be developed by identifying literariness in a short story, 'The Teacher' by Catherine Lim (1978). My choice of this short text can be summed up in Maley's (1999: 6) statement that "The triviality of language teaching materials is well attested". This author asserts that the content of most materials is devoid of all the aspects of our lives which make them real: sex, violence, disagreement, religious/political conflicts, real negotiation between opposing viewpoints, misunderstandings, and so on and so forth. By contrast English language teaching materials present a largely non-problematic, bland, uncontroversial view of life. It is truth that there are some exceptions, but for the most part, topics receive a trivial treatment. A contributory factor is doubtless the perceived need by publishers to avoid anything which may offend anyone, anywhere in the world—a side effect of the globalisation of sales. It is in this context where I think literature has a lot to say, because as Carter and McRae (1996) point out, literature gives us the opportunity to deal with complexities and subtleties which are not always present in other sort of texts.

Before going on, I would like to emphasize that, although some of the tasks that are going to be put forward in this article are original, some others have been taken from Philip Chan's article "Literature, Language Awareness and EFL", published in the journal *Language Awareness* (Volume 8, Number 1) in 1999. Those activities which are original are based on previous works such as Ruth Wajnryb's book *Grammar Dictation* (1990), Maria Kowal and Merrill Swain's article "From semantic to syntactic processing" (1997) and Seth Lindstromberg's book *The Recipe Book* (1990). The text is aimed at intermediate university students, although it could also be used in the *Bachillerato*.

OBJECTIVES

The aims of the first part, the pre-reading tasks, are to:
—arouse the students' interest

- correct mistakes
- reflect on language learning
- reconstruct a text read aloud

The second part, the post-reading activities, is designed to enable students to:

- reflect on language forms and functions
- work on meaning at different levels
- deal with literariness in a given text
- compare translations in their three languages
- reduce a text to a one word sentence through grammatical reductions
- use the language for affective (and aesthetic) purposes

As far as grammar is concerned, the goals are to review the verb tenses and to reflect on spelling and capitalization. Concerning vocabulary, informal/colloquial language will be analysed. As regards language functions, we will work on how to give advice and make suggestions. Regarding ways of learning, students will improve their ability to deduce meaning from context.

There are several possible ways of organising the learning group in order to achieve these objectives. In fact, the organisation of the class will vary from individual work to pair work, from small group work to whole class work. Each one involves different types of relationships between the lecturer and the learners. Similarly, as well as implying different relationships between the participants, these different organizational patterns also entail different types of product or contribution from the learner. The solution of the tasks is the responsibility of the learners, although ultimate control is still in the hands of the lecturer.

‘THE TEACHER’: TASKS

The following tasks address questions which focus learners on the context of meaning, involving their own responses, inferences, knowledge and experience of the world. This includes particularly their knowledge and experience of the target language.

In terms of procedure, the tasks are divided into two main sections. The ‘pre-reading tasks’ section serves the purpose of brainstorming, preparing learners for the language and subject matter of the text (Chan, 1999). This is a very important part within the planning of the lecture, since it is aimed at arousing the students’ interest in what is coming next. Although sometimes it is necessary to make reference to cultural issues or explain vocabulary students may require, in this case there is no need for any sort of special introduction. On the one hand, the text is relevant to the students, since it is set in a foreign language learning context. On the other hand, it is expected that students will be capable of deducing the meaning of most unknown words and expressions present in the text with the help of the context. Students tend to get bogged down as soon as they come across a couple of words together whose meaning is unknown to them, and therefore the teaching of strategies to prevent this from becoming a stumbling block in their reading comprehension is one of the teacher’s objectives.

Likewise, the dictogloss included in this first section (with which I will deal later) is aimed at fostering language awareness from the very beginning. The ‘post-reading tasks’

section seeks to develop language awareness a step further through identifying literariness in the text. Students progress from determining the meaning of an utterance to the more open critical analysis of the language organisation of the whole text. In terms of pedagogy, the tasks function to teach the four language skills —listening, speaking, reading and writing— in an integrative approach, while focus on language forms is also considered. They provide practice for creative writing as well (Chan, 1999).

The pre-reading tasks are as follows:

1. Read the following extracts and answer the questions below.

Extract A

I would like to become a nurse and successful career so I have a lot of money with luxuries, so I can buy a house for my mother and brothers and sisters and my favourite ambition I must strive very hard and make hard afford for I have no ambition to help my mother and brothers and sisters they is sure to suffer for my father he don't care at all everytime come back from selling cakes only he must drink and spend all money on drinks and sometimes he beats my mother

Extract B

My happiest day it is on that 12 July 1976 I will tell you of that happiest day. My father wanted me to help him in his cakes stall to sell cakes and earn money. He say I must leave school and stay home and help him. My younger brothers and sisters they are too young to work so they can go to school. My mother is too sick and weak as she just born a baby.

I was very sad because I don't like to sell cakes I like to learn in school. But I am scare my father he will beat me if I disobeyed him so I cannot say anything to him. He ask me to tell my principal of my school that I am not going to learn any more. I was scare my principal will ask me questions. Lucky my mother came home from the hospital where she born the baby, and my mother say to my father that I should learn in school and become nurse later. So I can earn more money. Sell cakes not earn so much money. She begged my father and at last my father agree. I think he agree because he was in good mood. If in bad mood like drunk he will beat my mother up and make trouble in the house. So my mother told me I was no need to stop learning in school. And that was the happiest day in my life which I shall never forget.

- (a) Where do you think the extracts are taken from?
- (b) How old is the writer?
- (c) What is the writer's gender?
- (d) What is the writer's nationality?
- (e) In which grade is the writer?
- (f) To whom is the writer writing?
- (g) For what purpose does the writer write?
- (h) Correct the first seven lines of Extract C
- (i) Give a title to each extract.

The main objective of this task is to arouse the students' interest in the reading. It will similarly give them the chance to correct mistakes which are familiar to them. Since the scope of the mistakes is very wide, it will allow the learners to correct them according to their proficiency.

2. Reflecting on language learning.

- (a) Describe the most interesting English lesson you had at pre-university level.
- (b) Describe the most boring English lesson you had at pre-university level.
- (c) What did you learn from your teacher or teachers of English at pre-university levels?
- (d) What do you expect most from your ideal teacher of English?

This is a very good way of reflecting on language learning. The idea is not only to talk about what takes place in the story, but also to relate it to our context and particularly to our lectures. This allows the students to give their opinions and put forward their proposals for consideration.

3. A dictogloss.

In an article published in 1993 Nobuyoshi and Ellis define communicative tasks. Among their criteria, they state that there must be a focus on message rather than linguistic code. I agree with Kowal and Swain (1997) when they defend that to present message and linguistic code in such a dichotomous relationship is to ignore the fundamental communicative function of many grammatical features. Moreover, there is no reason why a communicative task cannot be one in which learners communicate about grammar, in the context of trying to produce something they want to say in the target language. There is considerable amount of literature which suggests that raising the learner's consciousness of grammatical features can promote interlanguage development.

Before going on with the following tasks, I would like to make a parenthetical remark about the output hypothesis in order to lay the foundations of the forthcoming activity, the dictogloss. In her output hypothesis Swain (1985) proposes that two functions of output are important in enhancing L2 acquisition by helping students move from the predominantly semantic type of processing required in comprehension to a more syntactic form of processing needed for production.

First, it is hypothesised that when producing the target language, learners will sometimes come to know what they do not know. That is to say, in attempting to produce what they want to say, they may 'notice the gap' (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Schmidt, in press) between what they want to say and what they are able to say. The gap noticed while producing the target language may be an unknown lexical item or equally a particular grammatical feature that is needed to convey precisely the learners' intended meaning. One part of the output hypothesis proposes therefore, that, as a result of attempting to produce language which sometimes results in 'noticing a gap', learners will turn to others, or to their own linguistic resources and work out a solution; or they will be primed to notice it in future input.

Second, it is hypothesised that through talk in collaborative tasks, consciousness is raised. As Vygotsky did before, Swain claims that it is through the mediation of another that consciousness is created and raised. That is, if a task can be devised to have learners talk about the language they are producing, their talk may well serve the function of raising their awareness of forms, rules and their relationship to the meaning they are trying to express.

Swain thus proposes that one needs to discuss not just comprehensible input, but also comprehensible output. She suggests that output has an essential role in the development of language proficiency. More specifically, and drawing on her detailed analysis, Skehan (1994: 177) proposes the following reasons for the importance of output in learning:

- to generate better input
- to force learners into a more syntactic processing
- to enable learners to test hypotheses
- to develop automaticity
- to develop discourse skills
- to develop a personal voice

The idea behind the dictogloss is to make students reflect on their own output. Its use in this article was determined by its potential for encouraging participants to focus their attention on both creating meaning and paying attention to the way in which their meaning is expressed. Where possible, students were grouped in pairs. Duff (1986) and Doughty and Pica (1986) have suggested that dyads provide the most appropriate grouping for the L2 classroom, since in groups of more than two, it would be possible for the task to be completed with some students assuming only a minor role in it. It is my belief that in view of the cooperation and openness of discussion required by the task, self-selected groups would provide the best learning conditions for the students. As a result of this, the self-selected pairs gave rise to both heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings. The selected passage was the following:

1. *'Look', said the teacher to the colleague who was sitting beside him in the staffroom.*
2. *'Look at this composition written by a student in Secondary Four.*
3. *She's supposed to have had ten years of studying English, and see what she's written!*
4. *I'll read it to you.*
5. *The title of the composition is "My Happiest Day".'*
6. *The teacher read, pausing at those parts which he wanted his colleague to take particular note of.*

The dictogloss procedure is as follows. The passage is read to the students. Students are advised not to write anything during this time. The passage is then read again with pauses between sentences for the students to write notes. The whole text is then read a third time (this change was made after the first dictogloss of the semester in which students had difficulty reconstructing the text and complained that the task was too complex if they heard the text only twice as proposed by Wajnryb —1990—, a procedure which will probably be more adequate for advanced students).

The text itself consists of six sentences and the students are told to reconstruct it in six sentences. The students know that they have a certain amount of freedom in the way they choose to reconstruct the passage. In order to be correct, the original sense of each sentence needs to be present and the reconstructed sentences have to be as grammatically accurate as the students can manage, but the words and phrases used do not have to be the same as the original ones (Kowal & Swain, 1997). While students are trying to reconstruct the text, two dictionaries (a monolingual and a bilingual) are available in the class, and they can ask the teacher whenever they get stuck. Although these six sentences were chosen in an attempt to make them focus on verb tenses, which is the reason why all the vocabulary is already known by the students, the dictionaries are there to help them reconstruct the text in their own words, for which they may need to look up some lexical items. The amount of rephrasing that occurs in the reconstruction of the sentences depends on each pair.

Students were given approximately twenty minutes to work together on reconstructing the passage. At the end of this time, students were given another five minutes to write their reconstructed sentences onto a transparency for consideration by the whole class. At the end of this period, a selection of transparencies was chosen at random by myself for the whole class to discuss. I corrected the remaining transparencies and handed them back to the students during a subsequent lecture.

The following extracts are representative of the discussions which took place. The first three reconstructions are shown according to their fidelity to the source text, the first one being the closest to the original extract and the third one as an example of “unfaithfulness” to the source text. Those parts of their texts which appear in bold are the ones I wanted them to pay particular attention to and focus on:

Text 1

- 1) “Look”, said **a** teacher to a colleague who was **sat down** beside him in the staff room.
- 2) This is a composition of **one** of secondary fourth course (student).
- 3) She is **supposed to have** ten years of english studies.
- 4) I am going to read you her **texte**.
- 5) (The) **Texte**’s title is “My **hapiest day**”.
- 6) The teacher read some parts **wich** were important to him **in order to** the colleague took note of it.

Text 2

- 1) () **Luck** () , told **to** the teacher **wich** was **situated** in the staff-room.
- 2) Look () the composition that has been written by (a) students of **second** level.
- 3) She () supposed (students) had been learning English for ten years.
- 4) I am going to read **a** text.
- 5) The title of () composition was “My **happiest day in my life**”.

Text 3

- 1) () Look () , said the teacher in the college.
- 2) Look at this composition that is **on the start**.
- 3) **He suposse that he is very good study because the composition was perfect**.
- 4) **A** title of the composition is “**a party of the day**”.

Finally, and with the intention of illustrating with an example the more personal approach of one of the student pairs, a fourth reconstruction is added:

Text 4

A colleague was sitting beside the teacher in the stuffroom. The teacher showed him a composition called “**my happiest day**” written by a student who was in secondary. The student has been learning **english during** ten years. Finally, the teacher asked the colleague to take notes of the composition.

This final discussion about their reconstructed texts also shows that the students `notice the gap´ between what they want to say and what they are able to say. As predicted by the

output hypothesis, this happens as the students try to produce the target language. Secondly, and equally as important, this triggers a search for a solution (Kowal & Swain, 1997). Students work together to solve their linguistic difficulties, making form the focus of their discussions. The students formed hypotheses and tested them out against the dictionary, the lecturer and each other (it is worth mentioning that the dictionary was used only twice and by the members of only two groups). Vocabulary, verb tenses, morphology and complex syntactic structures each became the focus of their attention. Verbalisation of the problem allowed them the opportunity to reflect on it and better understand it.

As can be observed in these four examples, this sort of activity gives students the possibility of working at very different levels of proficiency, becoming thus a very useful tool when the group is made up of students whose command of the language varies considerably from each other's. It is also worth considering that different learners at different levels of proficiency identified and dealt with an entirely different set of linguistic problems and issues, but this is very interesting since it gives them the opportunity to work at their own pace and on their particular interests. Studies concerning the use of the dictogloss like the one completed by Kowal and Swain in 1997 have shown that students can provide useful feedback to one another, and that this task does encourage students to move from the semantic processing dominant in comprehension to the syntactic processing needed for production, an important aspect of the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985).

I therefore consider that it is important to include opportunities for students to produce extended output in collaborative circumstances, even if this involves the lecturer (myself in this case) giving up a degree of control over the language used and discussed while the students are working on the reconstruction of the text concerned.

Once the students have dealt with the pre-reading tasks they are given the complete original text to be read at home. The post-reading activities will take place in the following lecture, once they have read the text on their own at home. The story is divided into paragraphs, enabling students to work on several different aspects later on by making reference to the relevant paragraph. In the following lecture we start off by listening to a tape in which the text is read aloud, so that it is fresh in the students' minds before they start working on it (see appendix).

Before starting with the post-reading tasks, it has to be remembered that, although some of these post-reading activities have been made up by myself, some others are taken from the previously quoted article by Chan (1999). On some occasions, I have adapted them in an attempt to bring them closer to our teaching context.

The post-reading tasks are the following:

4. Speech acts: Levels of meaning.

Try to determine the intended effects of the following utterances on you:

- Put 'T' against the statement if it matches the quote
- Put 'F' if it does not match the quote
- Put '?' if you feel unsure

(a) *I give up! I resign!* (para. V)

(1) He is going to resign from teaching.

- (2) He is going to give up students like Tan Geok Peng.
- (3) He has lost confidence in his ability as a teacher.
- (4) He tries to demonstrate how frustrating and unfulfilling teaching is.
- (5) He tries to emphasise his hard effort does not pay off.
- (6) He tries to demonstrate that he is not to blame for the poor performance of his students.

(b) *...God, I wish I could help her!* (para. VIII)

- (1) He had tried to help her but it was not successful.
- (2) He wanted to help her but he was unable to do so.
- (3) He wanted God to help her because he was unable to do so.
- (4) He wanted God to help him so that he was able to help her.

(c) *She actually jumped from the eleventh floor!* (para. IX)

- (1) She jumped from the eleventh floor.
- (2) She did not jump from the eleventh floor.
- (3) He did not believe that she jumped from the eleventh floor.
- (4) He did not believe that she was dead.

(d) *If only she had told me of her problems* (para. IX)

- (1) She had not told him her problems.
- (2) She had told him her problems.
- (3) Only she had told him her problems.
- (4) He wished she had told him her problems.
- (5) If she had told him her problems, he could have saved her life.

This is a very good activity to work on both the basic literal meaning of the utterance, conveyed by the particular words and structures of the text (known as propositional or locutionary meaning), and the effect this written text has on the reader (known as illocutionary force or meaning).

5. Translation: Contrastive analysis between Basque, Spanish and English.

- (a) *'Look', said the teacher to the colleague who was sitting beside him in the staffroom* (para. I)
- (b) *...God, I wish I could help her!* (para. VIII)
- (c) *She actually jumped from the eleventh floor!* (para. IX)
- (d) *If only she had told me of her problems* (para. IX)

Students work in groups of four. Each student is given a piece of paper with one of the sentences at the top. Individually, the students translate the sentences into Spanish, fold the paper to hide the original sentence, and pass it on. The next student translates it into Basque, the third into English and so on. Some of the final sentences are written on the blackboard, compared and discussed.

This task seeks to illustrate how complex translation may become when there are different levels of meaning, while at the same time students are forced to carry out a contrastive analysis of their three languages. Despite the fact that there is a closer typological relatedness between Spanish and English than between Basque and English, there are cases in which Basque and English have similar structures, and on some occasions some structures are even more similar to Basque than to Spanish.

6. Literariness: Language for representation.

- (a) Why did the author entitle the story 'The Teacher'?
- (b) Why didn't the author give a name to the teacher?
- (c) Identify examples of ironic situations used in the story. For what purpose and effect does the irony serve?
- (d) What is the narrator's attitude to the teacher and his two colleagues?
- (e) In *When the news reached the school...* (para. IX), why doesn't the author specify what the news is?
- (f) To whom do you think the teacher was talking when the news of the suicide reached the school?
- (g) Why doesn't the author include any response to his talking?

This activity is particularly interesting, since it makes students think about the author's use of language in order to achieve some sort of literary effect. The lack of a name for the teacher, for example, implies some intention on the part of the author, but if students' attention is not drawn to this fact, most of them would probably miss it.

7. Reflecting on language forms: Down to one word.

Students are asked to focus their attention on the following extract which is written on the blackboard:

'For my part, I've taught them the use of the Tenses till I'm blue in the face, but they still come up with all kinds of Tense mistakes! I've drummed into them that when narrating a story or incident, they have to use the Past Tense, but I still get hideous mistakes such as the ones you heard just now.'

Students are divided into five groups and told that they are going to try to reduce this extract to one word. They take it in turns to remove one, two or three consecutive words from the extract. They make any necessary punctuation changes. Each time they make a reduction, they must read the new sentence to the next group to show that they have left a correct and complete one. The group which reduces the passage to a single word that makes sense by itself wins. My role is that of a referee, to reject those reductions which are not correct. The purpose of this activity is to get students to reflect on language forms in an enjoyable way.

8. Language for affective purposes.

- (a) In small groups try to describe the teacher, think about his teaching experience and methods, how many years he has taught English or what his relationship with the other staff-members is like.

- (b) In small groups talk about a sequel to 'The Teacher'. You may start from the point before or after the suicide.
- (c) Imagine you are a close pen-friend of Tan. She has written to you and enclosed the three extracts. She has also told you she got an F9 for her last essay. In pairs role-play a telephone conversation between Tan and yourself.
- (d) Rewrite the story from the point of view of Tan Geok Peng.

This last task intends to gather students' reactions to the story after having analysed and talked about it in depth. It can become a summary of their reactions, as the story may have aroused in them feelings of sorrow, anger, empathy, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

This text was chosen on the grounds that it is a complete work, not an extract or a simplified work. I consider the use of the text as a communicative unit, in contrast to the sentence unit, to be ideal for the improvement of my students' command of the English language. Moreover, although it is a short text, it is clear and expresses a great deal in a few words. Being concise becomes thus an advantage, because it allows us to work on it in depth and try to make the best of it by examining most of its components (Lasagabaster, 1998).

"Another important reason for the choice is that it embodies a high degree of literariness: it has greater potential to be used in teaching interpretative procedures for analysing relationships between the multi-levels of language organisation and their social and ideological functions" (Chan, 1999: 47). This helps the students to relate form to function and to apply and develop their knowledge of and about language. Furthermore, the use of a variety of different kinds of tasks makes teaching more communicative, since it provides a purpose which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

From the students' perspective, identifying literariness can also involve sharing of experience, exercising imagination, triggering aesthetic response and creativity. While they are learning the English language, they are being trained to face literary texts later in their specialization and develop a sensitivity to analyse language from this 'more literary' perspective. From my point of view, as a teacher, identifying literariness helps me to view texts and tasks in a continuum, thus helping to forge an interface between language and literature. Instead of just teaching the textbook and doing predominantly textbook talk in the classroom with the final examination in mind, I can adapt alternative materials and design different tasks myself for the classroom (Chan, 1999).

One of my main aims was to lend weight to the idea that literary texts can open up a new world to foreign language learners, allowing them to become aware of the inventive, stimulating and delightful experience of language manipulation. If the students read the text just as a paradigm for certain grammatical structures, the meaning of the text will be purely grammatical. However, and as Kramsch (1994: 138) puts it, if they "choose to give it an aesthetic reading, multiple layers of meaning will emerge from their personal response to the text". Students must become aware of the unconscious process through which they attribute meaning to the text by reflecting on the role of the author as creator and the reader as receiver of that creation, analysing at the same time how this process affects their different responses to the text.

In this sense literature could be observed as a means to boost student's language awareness (Lasagabaster, 1999b). A literary aware reader perceives linguistic structures and patterns, while analysing the manner in which they interact with the knowledge, how they produce the enjoyment attached to the reading process, and how they are built on—or run against—the so-called established conventions. In the EFL classroom literary texts have not usually been chosen on the basis of their potential to challenge. On the contrary, they are usually seen as a means to analyse linguistic structure or as an assimilationist model of literacy in which the teacher or lecturer cannot be bothered by challenging questions. This is the reason why I chose Catherine Lim's "The Teacher", since it is provocative and a very good example of *food for thought* for all those involved in the teaching-learning process.

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APPENDIX

The Teacher by Catherine Lim

Paragraph I

‘Look’, said the teacher to the colleague who was sitting beside him in the staffroom. ‘Look at this composition written by a student in Secondary Four. She’s supposed to have had ten years of studying English, and see what she’s written! I’ll read it to you. The title of the composition is “My Happiest Day”.’

Paragraph II

The teacher read, pausing at those parts which he wanted his colleague to take particular note of: ‘*My happiest day it is on that 12 July 1976 I will tell you of that happiest day. My father wanted me to help him in his cakes stall to sell cakes and earn money. He say I must leave school and stay home and help him. My younger brothers and sisters they are too young to work so they can go to school. My mother is too sick and weak as she just born a baby.*’ Can anything be more atrocious than this? And she’s going to sit for her General Certificate of Education in three months’ time! And listen to this:

Paragraph III

‘I was very sad because I don’t like to sell cakes I like to learn in school. But I am scare my father he will beat me if I disobeyed him so I cannot say anything to him. He ask me to tell my principal of my school that I am not going to learn any more. I was scare my principal will ask me questions. Lucky my mother came home from the hospital where she born the baby, and my mother say to my father that I should learn in school and become nurse later. So I can earn more money. Sell cakes not earn so much money. She begged my father and at last my father agree. I think he agree because he was in good mood. If in bad mood like drunk he will beat my mother up and make trouble in the house. So my mother told me I was no need to stop learning in school. And that was the happiest day in my life which I shall never forget.’

Paragraph IV

The teacher said slowly and meditatively, ‘I wonder why most of them write like that. Day in, day out, we teach grammar and usage. For my part, I’ve taught them the use of the Tenses till I’m blue in the face, but they still come up with all kinds of Tense mistakes! I’ve drummed into them that when narrating a story or incident, they have to use the Past Tense, but I still get hideous mistakes such as the ones you heard just now.’

Paragraph V

A week later, the teacher, while correcting composition exercises in the staffroom, again dropped his head into his hands in despair. It was a different colleague sitting beside him this time, but the distress in his voice was equally acute as he said, showing her a page from an exercise book: ‘What do you think of this as a specimen of Secondary Four Composition? I give up! I resign!’

Paragraph VI

‘Ah, they’re all like that’, sighed his colleague in sympathy. ‘You should see the grammar mistakes I get from my Pre-University students, mind you, Pre-University.’

Paragraph VII

The teacher held the offending page in front of his colleague, and with his forefinger traced the lines that had given most pain. ‘Now look at this: “*I would like is become a nurse and successful career so I have a lot of money with luxuries*”, —by the way, I had got them to write on “My Ambition”— “*so I can buy a house for my mother and brothers and sisters*”—this is the only sentence in the whole composition that is correct grammatically. Listen to this one, can you make anything of it? “*and my favourite ambition I must strive very hard and make hard afford for I have no ambition to help my mother and brothers and sisters they is sure to suffer for my father he don’t care at all everytime come back from selling cakes only he must drink and spend all money on drinks and sometimes he beats my mother*”, it’s that Tan Geok Peng from Secondary Four C, you know that timid, mousy-looking girl who looks ready to faint in fright the moment you call her to answer a question. You know, I’m getting very worried about the standard of English in my class. I guess I shall have to get Tan Geok Peng and the likes of her in for extra Saturday coaching, otherwise they’ll never make it in the exams. Three months away, I tell them. Just three months in which to polish up your grammar and vocabulary and punctuation, and write the first decent composition in your life!’

Paragraph VIII

The extra coaching did not save the poor teacher from the despair he was continually experiencing. ‘Ah!’ he said, shaking his head sadly, ‘what shall I do? Read this muck! Let me see —yes, it’s from that girl, Tan Geok Peng again— that girl will be the death of me, I tell you. I keep explaining things and going over and over the same things with her, but she insists on giving me such nonsense. Listen to this! She was supposed to write a story with the title “The Stranger” and all she did was write a great deal of trash about her father — “*He canned me everytime, even when I did not do wrong things still he canned me*”—she means “caned” of course— “*and he beat my mother and even if she sick, he wallop her*”. This composition is not only grossly ungrammatical but out of point. I had no alternative but to give her an F9 straightaway. God, I wish I could help her!’

Paragraph IX

When the news reached the school, the teacher was very upset and said, ‘Poor girl. What? She actually jumped from the eleventh floor? Such a shy, timid girl. If only she had told me of her problems. But she was always too shy and timid to speak up.’