LITERARY TEXTS AS INPUTS TO TEACH LANGUAGE SKILLS USING MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES: A STUDY REPORT

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Abstract

Working within the cognitive paradigm, the present study explores the possibility of using Literature to motivate academic reading and developing cognitive reading strategies among engineering students. This approach is based on the premise that there is a need to involve learners in a more exciting process of reading rather than merely preparing them for content-based examination. By applying motivational comprehension strategies to analyze and comprehend poems, students may eventually be able to use those same skills and strategies when reading longer pieces of text.

Of all the four language skills, reading has always been the core of English courses. Learning to read is basic to all subjects and progress in reading attainment in students depends on the methods employed and the interest created in them to read.

The present study showed that implementation of motivational strategies (self-questioning) to comprehend difficult texts such as poems seem to have had a positive impact on learners' comprehension in reading. It also showed that when learners were left to work independently and when appropriate strategies were provided, there was an increase in their motivation to read.

Key words: motivational strategies, self-questioning, poetry, comprehension.
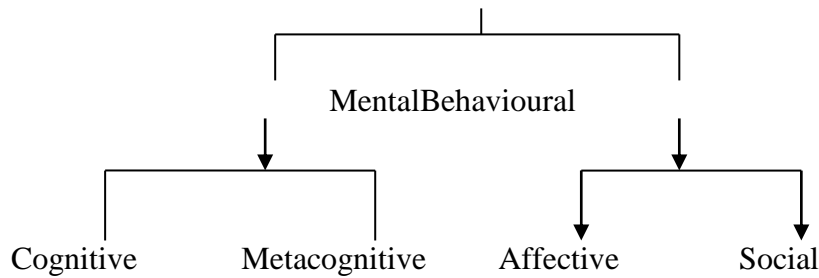
Introduction:

Why should the Engineering students do away with the study of literature and why is teaching of any literary element seen as hindrance to language learning? These are the basic issues as a language teacher I always get concerned with. I feel passive and neutral with the semester scheme framed on the basis of technical syllabi. Why not I introduce a bit of literary component as an emergent technique in the teaching of communicative skills? Hence the present paper!

. Learner strategies:

The strategies used by a learner involve both mental and behavioral aspects f the individual. The mental activities include the strategies which determine the information that a reader selects and acquires from a text, how he organizes it and integrates it into his existing schemata. These are termed *cognitive strategies*. Other activities called *metacognitive strategies* help a reader in controlling/monitoring his reading process and in evaluating the outcome. According to Weinstein and Mayer (1998) there are also strategies that affect the learner's motivational or affective state (*affective strategies*) and fourth set of behavioral activities, which decide the learner's interaction with his peers, teacher and other individuals around him (*social strategies*).

Weinstein and Mayer's categorization can be represented diagrammatically as given below:

Strategies

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                        │
                 MentalBehavioural
          ↓                           ↓
   ┌──────┴──────┐            ┌────────┴────────┐
Cognitive   Metacognitive   Affective        Social
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Block and Mangieri (1995) asserted the need for all readers to develop comprehension strategies and skills for reading fluently and independently regardless of their proficiency in English. Their initial investigations of comprehension strategies focused on the training of an individual strategy and whether readers could use it. Then the focus shifted to whether combinations of strategies could facilitate and motivate text comprehension. The success of teaching motivational strategies then led to investigations of preparing teachers to teach comprehension strategies in natural classroom contexts.

Researchers like Wenden and Rubin, (1987) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have claimed that an awareness of one's strategies will lead to effective learning and consequently independence in learning. In the case of reading, this would mean tht an awareness of one's reading strategies leads to effective reading and consequently better comprehension.

Out of the 12 categories of motivational strategies identified by Block and Pressley (2001), the specific strategies that are implemented in the current study are visualizing, questioning, making connections, summarizing, and evaluating.

Visualizing: This helpsthe reader to construct an image of what is read. The constructed image serves as a memory representation of the reader's interpretation of the text. Mental pictures make reading three-dimensional and help readers engage with text in ways that make it personal and memorable. In this way readers adapt their images as they continue to read.

Questioning: Teaching students to generate their own questions about material to be read is an important instructional goal. Whenever readers are involved in asking questions, they are engaged in active comprehension. Questioning is a reading strategy that can be used before, during, and after reading. Readers who use this strategy actively ask questions of the text as they read. As a result, elaborative questioning improves comprehension of texts during instructional and independent reading contexts.

Making connections: Students make personal connections with the text by using their schema   (background knowledge). There are three main types of connections learners make while reading text.

- **Text-to-Self (T-S)** refers to connections made between the text and the reader's personal experience.
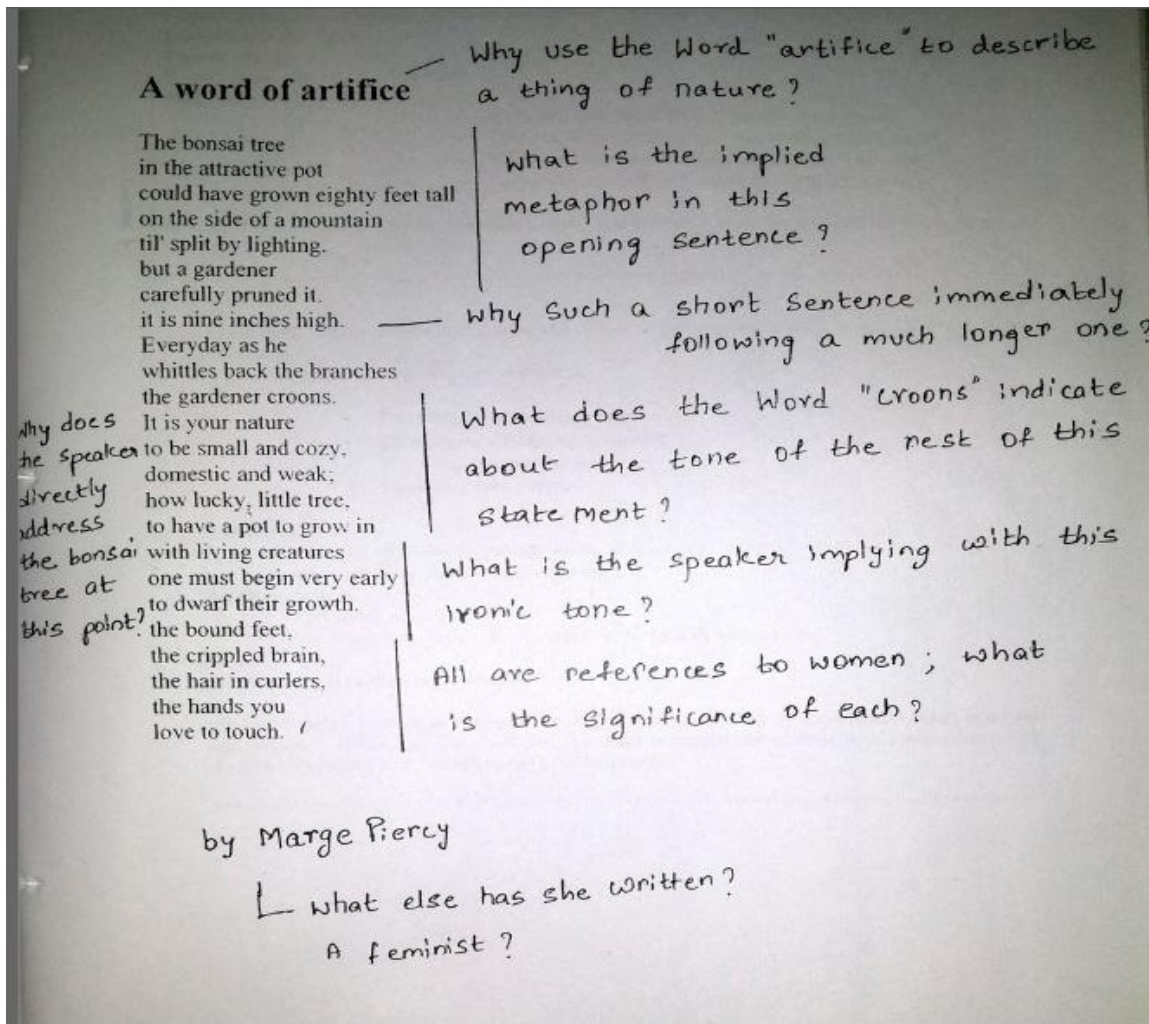
- **Text-to-Text (T-T)** refers to connections made between a text being read to a text that was previously read.
- **Text-to-World (T-W)** refers to connections made between a text being read and something that occurs in the world.

As teachers our role is to activate learners' background knowledge before reading.

Summarizing: Instruction in this can make readers more aware of how a text is structured and how ideas are related. To create a text summary a reader must discern and stress central and important ideas, generalize, and minimize less relevant details. This strategy usually involves drawing conclusions and forming a best guess using evidence -- context clues, picture clues, etc.

Evaluating: Usually referred to as "reading between the lines" this strategy helps the reader in knowing the purpose for reading and helps the reader distinguish between important and unimportant information. Reader's thinking changes as they gather more information. New information makes the reader re-evaluate their schema to form new schema.

Procedure: This study was designed to help 25 students belonging to class B.Tech (II year) in improving their reading skills with the help of literary texts as inputs during their soft skills training classes. That was the schedule when we could get a small class. They were divided into 5 groups with 5 students in each group. Each group was distributed with a poem to read using the strategies mentioned above. To begin with, the students were asked to read the given poems and generate as many questions as possible to interpret the lines. They were asked to read the poems for the second time and try to illustrate their understanding within the group. The task goal was to use the questions as a spring board for discussion and identify key ideas and formulate interpretations based on the lines they read. The task activity involved the students to choose an area of focus for questioning and further refine their skills by formulating increasingly complex questions about the lines. They were asked to choose a question that intrigues them and develop a writing prompt or statement that they defend by gathering evidence from the text to support it. A sample of the activity for the poem 'A work of artifice' is given below:

A word of artifice

The bonsai tree
in the attractive pot
could have grown eighty feet tall
on the side of a mountain
til' split by lighting.
but a gardener
carefully pruned it.
it is nine inches high.
Everyday as he
whittles back the branches
the gardener croons.
It is your nature
to be small and cozy,
domestic and weak;
how lucky, little tree,
to have a pot to grow in
with living creatures
one must begin very early
to dwarf their growth.
the bound feet,
the crippled brain,
the hair in curlers,
the hands you
love to touch.

by Marge Piercy

Handwritten annotations:

— Why use the Word "artifice" to describe a thing of nature?

What is the implied metaphor in this opening sentence?

— Why such a short sentence immediately following a much longer one?

What does the Word "croons" indicate about the tone of the rest of this statement?

What is the speaker implying with this ironic tone?

All are references to women; what is the significance of each?

Why does the speaker directly address the bonsai tree at this point?

└ What else has she written?
A feminist?

The students then discussed the questions and tried to analyze their interpretations through visualizing, making connections as follows.

The first four lines of the poem celebrate the latent potential of the tree, which might have grown to an enormous height. But then line 5 appears and reminds us that the giant tree would probably someday have been "split by lightning." This reminder is crucial, because it prevents the poem fro seeming naïve, sentimental, and romantic. A bonsai tree can be carefully protected from harm and may even live far longer than a tree exposed to the dangers of nature, of which lightning is only one. Yet the poem implies that existence in nature, and the development of one's natural potential, are both more valuable than a life that is safe, controlled, and limited. Line 5 is crucial because it acknowledges the potential dangers of a life without limits, but the poem accepts and even welcomes those dangers as the risks inherent in a life of freedom.

In their discussion they have identified the nuances of the poem as follows:

The satirical tone of the poem is implied by its title: "A Work of Artifice". If Piercy had titled the poem "A Work of Art," the tone would have been much more unambiguously positive. By using the word "artifice," however, she already begins to imply something deceptive, crafty, subtle, and cunning. Whereas we normally consider bonsai trees admirable, impressive examples of human skill, this poem finally suggests that miniaturization involves diminution

and distortion: something that might have been grand and unfettered is turned into something neatly shaped and carefully controlled, but also puny. This process, the poem suggests, more often happens to humans than to trees.

They finally wrote the summary of the poem as follows:

"*A Work of Artifice,*" *by the American poet Marge Piercy, is a small poem about a large subject. The poem describes how a bonsai tree, which in nature has the potential to grow to an enormous height, is instead carefully pruned so that it becomes something miniature—a mere, tiny glimpse of its potential self. Some bonsai trees, for instance, are actually miniature versions of giant redwoods, and it is clearly the latter kind of tree that the speaker has in mind when she mentions a tree that "could have grown eighty feet tall" (3). Rather than celebrating the careful "artifice" involved in producing a finely crafted tiny tree (as one might have expected at first), the poem laments the ways in which the potential of people in general—and of women in particular—can be stifled by the ways they are raised.*

Later the poem suggests that the gardener not only limits the freedom of the tree he prunes but that he also insists (falsely) that it is the tree's "nature / to be small and cozy" (12-13). Is the gardener a deliberate liar, or is he merely deceiving himself? In either case, he is not expressingthe truth: the "nature" of the tree is in fact to be anything but "small." The gardener takes pride in shaping the tree to his own purposes, imposing his own will on it so that it conforms to his wishes.

Conclusion:

Having the skills and strategies to comprehend and respond to information in the given inputs is likely to play a central role in our students' success in improving their comprehension skills. Although our study was limited to a small group of students, it provides important initial insights into the comprehension strategies readers' use as they seek information from the text. While this study cannot show that explicit instruction of reading comprehension strategies through poetry can increase reading scores, it can, at the very least, be a starting point for getting students to focus on their own metacognition, which could lead to greater understanding of text.

References:

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Bio Data

Dr Suvarna Ragini, *Ph D from EFLU, Hyderabad has 15 years of experience as English teacher. Currently she is teaching English language to B Tech students at Chaitanya Bharathi Institute of Technology at Hyderabad. She is also Academic Counsellor at EFLU. Her areas of interest are reading and writing skills.*