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CHRISTOPHER BRUMFIT:
Language and Literature Teaching:
From Practice to Principle
Oxford-New York-Toronto-Sydney-Frankfurt:
Pergamon Press. 1985, 161 pages

(Section Four: "Towards a Methodology for Literature Teaching", pp. 103-116)

Refreshing and far-reaching in their implications are the principles for the teaching of literature proposed by Christopher Brumfit in this publication whose appearance marked the end of a decade (1974-84) and an era spent in the Department of English for Speakers of Other Languages in the University of London's Institute of Education. Although only three of the 23 articles in this collection are dedicated to the role of literature in the teaching of language, their very inclusion under the fourth section heading, "Towards a Methodology for Literature Teaching", is both welcome and significant. For, as the author justifiably points out, while language teachers have been drawing for many years on sophisticated arguments and seminars about methodology for their classroom procedures, literature teachers have seldom paused to reflect on the criteria being used with regards to the aims and organization of their programmes and in their teaching methods. This is partly due, paradoxically, as he mentions, to the high status accorded to literature in the humanities field, a reputation that has fostered a careless attitude to such practical matters as method. This has been furthered by the scarce attention given to the teaching of literature in recent approaches to language teaching.

Like its predecessor, *Problems and Principles in English Teaching*, Pergamon, 1980, this collection of papers, in its entirety, constitutes an extended commentary on major issues in language and literature teaching, and teacher education in these areas in the past decade. Some were delivered as keynote speeches at conferences; others were "deliberately tendentious pieces" for non-academic journals. Whatever their original context, all are the product of the author's vast and varied experience, which in literature alone includes teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, to native and non-native speakers of English, and running training courses in a large number of countries. Underlying each paper and expressing the author's basic philosophy as suggested in the book's sub-title, is his attempt "to derive useful general principles, compatible with our fullest understanding of theory, from our current practice." Brumfit is convinced that innovation is unlikely to succeed unless it builds on the existing situation by taking into account both its strengths and weaknesses.

This attitude is reflected by the organization of the papers into five sections under the following titles: Section One: Communicative Language Teaching; Section Two: The Context of Language Teaching; Section Three: Criticisms of Current Practice; Section Four: Towards a Methodology for Teaching Literature; and Section Five: Towards a Methodology for Teacher Training. Among the topics discussed are an evaluation of the teaching of English to non-native speakers during the 1980's, the matter of 'Mother Tongues, Second Languages and Foreign Languages: metaphors of goals against growth', a response to Wilkins on notional syllabuses, a review of Gertrude Moskowitz about 'caring and sharing' in the foreign language class, the decision-making pyramid and teacher training for ELT and a broader-based philosophical issue appearing under the provocative title of 'Some Humanistic Doubts about Humanistic Language Teaching'.

The three papers contained in the section on literature, which is the main object of this review, are a continuation of one in *Problems and Principles in English Teaching* about the Tanzanian experience

(Brumfit, 1980). All assume that the ultimate goal in literature teaching is to enable as many people as possible to read and enjoy the great works of international literature and that not to have access to these masterpieces is "to be deprived of valuable educational and human experience for anyone who is brought up within the western educational tradition." Brumfit recognizes the problem of shifting tastes in defining what IS a 'masterpiece', but is content with a loose definition based on some agreement between critics and readers as to which are the most interesting works to think about. While subscribing to a wide-ranging and eclectic notion of taste, he does not eliminate the notion altogether. Not all reading is equally valuable and teachers should guide their students towards the 'best' accounts of the human predicament, which for him are the 'least simplified and the most truthful' ones. This is a useful interpretation of the term 'best', but certainly not one that will satisfy all experts.

After this brief introduction to the fourth section, the author describes the first paper on 'Reading Skills and the Study of Literature in a Foreign Culture' as being essentially philosophical and discursive in its approach to a preliminary attempt to consider the relationship between reading in a foreign language and the teaching of literature. It is 'preliminary', he says, because this is "an area which has been neglected in recent discussions on language teaching, while practice has continued to relate the two." He goes on to define the problem of his paper as being precisely the failure to take literature teaching into account in the latest language teaching methods. Increasing recognition, however, of the problems associated with the building up of a truly notional syllabus in communicative language teaching, especially that of including a developmental structure in relation to the concepts and subject matter, have led some academics to the reconsideration of literature as a convenient source of content for a foreign language course. Brumfit does not advocate the use of literature teaching as a cure for the ills besetting communicative syllabuses, but in arguing the role that literature teaching might have at fairly advanced levels, he sees it as a worthwhile task for several reasons, one being that literature is one of only three areas on which a foreign language *content* syllabus could be constructed which would not conflict with other curriculum claims (the other two are linguistics and civilization). Over and above any other criterion, however, there must be a content which is in itself worthwhile if advanced language teaching is to be truly effective.

The author goes on to support Culler's theory of literary competence as the only sound basis for the development of an authentic literature syllabus. The latter, he says, will not consist simply in the use of literature texts for advanced language purposes, but will aim at improving the reading of a literary text. While accepting that there can be no final reading of such a text, he says it is possible to avoid making inappropriate responses through a misunderstanding of the codes, not all of which are linguistic, being operated by recognizing the conventions that a text draws on. A good reader can, though not necessarily explicitly, not only recognize them, but connect these conventions to the world of non-literary experience which literature imitates or comments on. The non-linguistic codes referred to may vary in complexity and accessibility, and include plot, relationship between characters, exploitation of ideas and value systems, formal structure in a generic sense and relationships between any of these and the world outside literature itself.

The relations with pedagogy and advanced reading are the next two points to be tackled. With regards to the first, the teaching of literature does not merely involve an extension of ordinary reading skills, for it is possible to be a good reader and at the same time unfamiliar with the literary conventions of a particular culture. A literary pedagogy must develop literary awareness, a task of sensitivizing learners to literary conventions which is much more difficult in a foreign language because of the confusion which reigns in the teaching of mother tongue literature. On the other hand, the reading of literature does not require special reading strategies, because responding to literature is not just an understanding of the language of the text, but the ability to see it as a coherent piece of discourse. According to this view, reading strategies which make use of explicit analytical devices will have less relevance.

Brumfit's simple pedagogical model for literature teaching is built on what he considers to be the fundamental characteristic of a good reader of literature: the capacity to generalize either from one text to other aspects of the literary tradition, or to personal or social meanings outside of literature. Stressing that literature is concerned with abilities not knowledge, the author says the capacity to

perceive and explore relationships between different literary texts can be developed through reading texts deliberately linked to each other for pedagogical purposes by similarities in subject matter, structure or other formal aspects, by thematic intention or any other appropriate device. The ability to perceive and explore relationships between literary texts and ordinary life involves increasing familiarity with the mimetic properties of literature. The latter can be achieved by grading the complexity and subtlety of external reference in the texts used. He recommends starting with fairly simple allegorical or mythical works.

Once it has been accepted that literature teaching is about abilities, not knowledge, that these abilities are totally bound up with the network of conventions which all writers choose to exploit, and that both foreign language and mother tongue literature must respond to this, it is possible to list the basic criteria for the selection of texts for advanced work in teaching foreign literatures. In the first group the author mentions three criteria which relate to reading of any kind: the linguistic level, the cultural level and length. The second group, significant in purely literary terms, consists of the pedagogical role (in relation to the literature-literature or literature-life connections), genre representation and the classic status or 'face validity' of the texts.

The main conclusions which are drawn from this paper are, firstly, that the grading of both literature teaching texts and strategies must consider a good deal more than simple language knowledge. Secondly, student's authentic responses to the literary tradition will help the development of suitable syllabuses, and in turn will be developed through a carefully graded sequence of texts. Finally, literary texts, if used seriously to develop literary competence, will provide an extremely suitable base from which motivated language activity can develop.

The second paper, 'Wider Reader for Better Reading: an alternative approach to teaching literature', based on the idea of developing a reading community, describes an attempt to reject the 'set books' approach to teaching literature from sixth-form level upwards and in its place to develop in the students an attitude to works of literature which will accompany them in subsequent reading. Starting with the young reader's inevitably limited experience of both literature and life, the teacher's first task is to help the students acquire the ability to compare constantly: their experience of other books in relation to those of the same tradition, as well as in relation to knowledge and experience outside of literature.

Students were asked at the beginning of this experiment to read widely, to respond to groups of texts rather than single texts, to work within a broad and flexible framework. Concentrating on set fields rather than set texts, tutors produced four basic book lists for students to opt for, employing four different criteria in their selection: A period —post-1945 English literature; a genre— satire; a theme— war literature; and a national comparison —twentieth-century American and Russian literature. The lists were given to students as long as possible before the start of term and they could read around the general area in any way that seemed appropriate. A flexible contact system was established with the tutors and the students themselves determined with anticipation the details of the work programme which consisted in (a) seminars led by students, (b) tutor-led seminars, (c) various forms of projects, with small groups of students working with the tutor at any one time, and (d) one-to-one discussions with students. Written work included a long essay on a topic chosen by the student and a short piece of practical analysis of a passage in a book, or a piece of creative work associated with the reading field. Procedures used by the students included the reading of texts, written commentaries, reading reports, preparation of the formal works, the gathering of background information and preparing for seminar presentations. When asked to by the students, tutors produced occasional lectures, and other activities including prepared play-readings, discussion of recordings of drama and poetry and the reading of short poems or prose pieces for comment.

The great value of the course, according to the author, was the establishment of a 'reading community': a group of people with varying experience of life and literature with the agreed aim of sharing their reading in both formal and informal situations. At the end of two terms they had read 27 books, 21 of them 'properly'. All had been intensely involved in some form of creative contact with literature.

The description of the experiment concludes with a specimen option list on satire, among whose

22 authors and texts are Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*), Geoffrey Chaucer (*'The Pardoner's Tale'*), Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*), Joseph Heller (*Catch 22*) and the magazine, *Private Eye*.

Although most of the procedures mentioned by the author are used to some extent in the majority of educational establishments where literature is taught, it would obviously be necessary to modify the experiment in those places where such a wealth of resources, whether human (several tutors and students with the maturity to pact, organize and direct their own seminars), material (texts, recordings, etc.), temporal (21 books well read in one course) and others (libraries with ample time-tables) was not available. And it would be more difficult to implement in those countries or institutions where spoon-feeding methods and teacher-centred courses were more prevalent. Even so, the activities outlined in this model of a student-orientated course, could help revitalize most approaches to the teaching of literature.

The principles already presented in these first two papers —the necessity of grading in the selection of texts and syllabus organization, literary competence seen as the main aim of literature teaching, the concept of literature as experience— are brought together in a more polished way in the third paper, entitled 'Literature Teaching as an Educational Process' which was presented at the Naples Conference on the Teaching of Literature, December 1983. The author notes that although substantially rewritten, it incorporates material from the introduction to *Literature and Language Teaching*, Brumfit and Carter (eds.), Oxford University Press, 1985. To the above-mentioned principles, the author adds, as his starting-point, a definition of literariness, then more criteria for grading, followed by an extremely important discussion about the need to distinguish the reasons for teaching literature before planning syllabuses and, finally, a three-stage, and tentative model of the educational process in the teaching of literature.

Who better qualified than the author, with his prodigious range of both classroom and conference experience to affirm that it is rare for literature teaching to be seriously discussed in an educational context and that frequently "it is taught because it has always been taught, in the way in which it has always been taught, and frequently it is subtly turned into cultural studies, or linguistics, or advanced English proficiency work, or history"!

The first of the key issues on which his argument rests, is the notion of literariness which he defines as the intersection between a horizontal axis reflecting the language act which exploits the resources of the time and place in which it was written, and the vertical one, largely determined by the reader's expectations in according the status of 'literature' to a class of texts. The latter may be characterized by its fictionality, but may also be characterized by a decontextualization implicit in fictionality, but which can be found in any text read independently of its original transactional purposes. Keats's letters, for example, are read as literature and not just for biographical information. The conventions on the vertical axis are the literary and linguistic ones of the day. Brumfit maintains that part of our developing ability to read literature well depends on increasing the students' awareness of the context of any particular text on both these axes. On the basis of any similar interpretation of literariness, it is possible to determine more precisely what it is that we expect of students —whether native or non-native— whose aim is to become more proficient readers of literature. Four factors must be taken into account: a language minimum, the universality or otherwise of the nature of the cultural references, and also of the literary conventions, and fourthly, the intellectual demands. For example, it requires a greater intellectual effort to read Saul Bellow than to read Hemingway, although they are novelists of equal status. To this list must be added the pedagogical criterion of length, as fatigue is a factor in misunderstanding. Having drawn the reader's attention to the role of this type of factors, the author then takes up the issues of syllabus organization, the ordering of texts, and teaching methods.

Under the sub-title 'Is literature 'caught' or 'taught'?, Brumfit says that it is virtually impossible to 'teach' someone to like a particular book, but it is possible to help students to avoid disliking a book simply because they misunderstand the conventions being used, or because the language is too difficult, or because the cultural references are inaccesible. He goes on to point out that the argument about what is caught and what is taught really rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of teaching any complex subject. "None of us", he says, "teach anything worthwhile directly to students: we simply

create the conditions for successful learning." The development of the kinds of responses that we would expect of any sympathetic and reasonably informed adult reader is a model of behaviour that can only be caught and never commanded or instructed.

In the next part of the paper, dedicated to 'The Nature of Literature Syllabuses', the author emphasizes the need to distinguish whether literature is being taught for language purposes, or to teach 'culture', or to study it in its own right. Educationally, the pure literature syllabus can be justified in its own right, but it should not be confused with syllabuses for the teaching of either language or culture. As for the typical secondary school learner, a literary response can only arise out of reading the text (it cannot be given by a teacher); the first stage for both native and non-native speakers must be that of minimum language competence. He goes on to point out an aspect of literature teaching which he feels has not been sufficiently taken into account, namely three possible situations in school: 1. Students working on literature in their mother tongue, with a great deal of aesthetically structured speech and children's writing behind them. 2. Students working through a foreign or second language from a culture with a well-developed literary tradition, with which they are already slightly familiar. 3. Students working through a second language whose experience of artistically organized language is largely oral, and whose culture may have quite different assumptions about aesthetics and language from those of Western Europe. These three positions are all relative to each other, and in fact pose fewer differences between them than might appear at first sight. He adds (to the relief of all teachers of literature who think that only their students have had such pathetically little exposure to literary texts), that even in the case of mother tongue students, and irrespective of their social class, few will come from homes where reading is held in high esteem. Wide reading and appreciation of literature is thinly spread in all groups of the population, he asserts.

For all of these three groups, however, the reading of works of literature is to be conceived of as primarily an *experience* and the literary syllabus which is concerned primarily with enabling students to respond to writing as literary rather than instrumental, pragmatically useful discourse, should have two broad stages. The first will aim to provide the students with 'experience' of literature; the second, to describe, explain or 'account for' the experience. The author considers that a common error of literature teaching is to reverse this process.

Although the literature teacher is socializing students into a community of serious readers, this is not with any necessary assumptions about what texts must be read, but with the assumption that the best reading matter will be approached through a tradition that is the accumulation of thousands of readers' experience, and for the light it sheds on them and their human condition. In order not to impose unnecessary limitations, then, we do not start with a programme of 'knowledge about' any particular literature. The principle that we are not trying to teach specific books but rather we are teaching attitudes and abilities which will be relevant to the reading of any major works of literature, should be borne in mind always, says the author.

Brumfit's three-phase model for the teaching of literature is presented as tentative and open to different interpretations. Stage I is concerned with minimum access (language, etc.); Stage 2, with the literary response; Stage 3, with accounting for or explaining the literary response. Brumfit's view, which he recognizes as being rejected by many scholars, is that only when the reader has responded to literature should he or she be asked to understand literary theory, be it structuralist, deconstructionist or traditional. The key questions to be decided on are the extent to which literary response can move back into language development or explanation of literary response, back into literary response itself. Those who use literature as a means of teaching language seem to suggest that it is possible to move from 2 to I and those who use literary theory as a means of teaching literature seem to suggest that it is possible to move from 3 to 2. Those committed to stylistics as a major device in literature teaching may be using it for either of these transitions.

There is much food for thought in these three papers for both language and literature teachers irrespective of whether in their particular situation they are concerned with the mother tongue, a foreign or second language. Long overdue is the author's clarion-call to teachers of literature to come down from their ivory towers and to examine their basic premises with respect to syllabus organization and methodology, and to language teachers to consider what are their attitudes towards, and the use

they are making of, literature in their teaching procedures. Brumfit presents his ideas clearly, with conviction but without dogmatisms. True to his principles and the title of this section '*Towards* (my underlining) a Methodology for Literature Teaching', he suggests some broad principles based on observations from his extensive practice, to open up discussion and new possibilities for the teaching of both language and literature in any part of the world.

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