

TEACHING GRAMMAR WITH OSCAR WILDE

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ABSTRACT

In English teaching, there has been a dichotomy between language and literature. Literature is sometimes perceived as isolated from language. Teachers of English are reluctant to teach literature feeling that they do not possess the competence in literature. Teachers of literature feel similar reluctance due to the perception that they do not master grammar adequately. This article tries to find a possible way of teaching grammatical aspects through literary works by adopting Carlson and Tovatt's way of reading.

Keywords: *teaching grammar, Oscar Wilde, literary work*

INTRODUCTION

In English teaching, there has been a dichotomy between language and literature (Kramsch, 1993, p. 7). This seems to be true as seen in universities with their different departments concerning English teaching and literature. As a logical result, teachers of English would be reluctant to teach literature because they feel they do not possess the competence in literature, while teachers of literature feel the same due to the language teaching aspects which may reduce the joy of reading literature.

In the light of the pragmatic approach to Literature, such a dichotomy needs not exist because Literature is essentially a means to entertain and to teach (Abrams, 1953). This concept extended broadly, teachers have their justifications for applying Literature as a means to teach language.

In the 2020 curriculum of English Language Education Study Program of Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, Literature classes are given in semesters 3 to 5 to provide students with more insights about native English culture (Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, 2020 pp. 34, 40, 47). This is designed based on the concept that learning a language cannot be separated from learning the background culture.

For several years in the past, however, the teaching of Literature classes has been emphasized on providing students with adequate knowledge and interest in writing theses on Literature. After reading works of Literature, students were asked to write some kinds of literary appreciation ranging from shorter length to longer one. While this is not wrong, discrepancy has been seen in the increase of the number of theses on Literature and the decrease of students' language mastery and competence.

The fact ignites questions on the effectiveness of Literature classes to enhance students' mastery of English. Elkiliç et al (2011) emphasize that even though Literature once seemed to lose its prestige for teaching English grammatical structures in the midst of newly emerging methods and approaches such as Audio-Lingual Method, Silent Way, Desuggestopedia, and especially the Communicative Approach, it somehow regained its significance due to the fact that the Communicative Approach aims "to get and convey the correct message but not to be careful about the correct grammar or pronunciation."

The objective of this article is to provide some possible designs of conducting Literature classes to give more opportunities to students to get more and better exposures and practices in language. This article presents an example of topics presented in Prose and Poetry, one of literature classes in English Language Education Study Program, Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University.

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Reading Literary Works

In studying a literary work, Abrams (1953) summarizes four approaches which are mimetic, pragmatic, expressive and objective. Each approach emphasizes different aspects in the relationship between a work and the three other components related to the existence of a work.

For a much simpler and practical way to people and readers in general, Carlsen and Tovatt suggest two stages of levels in reading literary works (Carlsen and Tovatt, 1979). They distinguish reading literary works into literal level (plain sense) and figurative level (implications).

In the literal level, the purpose of reading is to get the basic facts literally written by the author. Readers are invited to understand what is literally written. This level is in fact similar to what is referred to as comprehension reading. This level is important to get the understanding of what is exactly stated by the author.

In this literal level, readers understanding can be judged either true or false, correct or incorrect.

In the figurative level, the purpose of reading is to try to grasp what is implied by the author. It is believed that authors do more than just tell stories. Authors write basing on their background experiences. Similarly, readers read and then try to interpret meanings using their own different background experiences. In the reading process, good readers will test the author's idea against their own idea in order to accept or to deny the idea. As a result, different readers with different background experiences may have different focus and interpretation on the same work.

In this figurative level, readers' interpretation cannot be judged as true or false, or as correct or incorrect. And this is why Literature is referred to as poly-interpretable.

Learning Grammar from Literary Works

For language classes, literary works can serve as materials to have real encounters with how language is used. Emphasis is given more on understanding the language in attempts to understanding the text. In other words, students are dealing with the literal level.

To achieve the aforementioned purposes, the presentation of a literary work is divided into several steps. The steps are aimed at better understanding of the language used and more accurate understanding of the text.

The steps presented here are taken from the materials which were developed for "Prose and Poetry" class in English Language Education Study Program of Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University. Each unit in the materials is divided into four steps, i. e., *Previewing Language*, *Reading the Text*, *Understanding the Text*, and *Thinking It through*.

A. *Previewing Language*

Before reading the literary work, the teacher previews the language aspect which students will encounter in the work. Students are first given a review of grammatical aspects. This can cover vocabulary, sentence patterns, specific expressions, or some other structural and grammatical aspects which appears in the corresponding literary text. Students are then presented with some exercises to further review their mastery.

The benefit of this step is twofold. First, this section serves as the introduction and or reinforcement on the grammatical aspects. Second, this section can primarily be a preliminary aid for students to understand the grammatical construction and aspects encountered later on in the work under study. In other words, this step is basically the opportunity for teachers to teach language.

B. *Reading the Text*

The next step is the encounter with the literary work. Students read the text together in class. For short texts, students can be asked to read aloud in turns. At this section, students are forced to exercise with pronunciation. Corrections will usually arise promptly from fellow students.

This step is of great importance because this is students' actual encounter with the literary text. This step, therefore, should not be skipped.

Students get benefit from this section in that they practice their reading skills and their pronunciation (for short texts) as well.

C. Understanding the Text

The third step is devoted to understanding the text, the literary work presented. This can be done in the form of comprehension questions or some other comprehension tasks. The purpose of this step is to guarantee students' accurate understanding of the basic facts of the work. This indeed is the literal level of reading the work.

Activities for this step can be similar to those of comprehension reading. Understanding of what, who, when, where, how, and why will be beneficial. In this step, teachers can develop assessment or questions similar to those in comprehension reading. There can be correct and wrong answers to the questions.

D. And Thinking It Through

The last step is to invite students to think more deeply about the work they just read. This can be done by connecting the ideas they get from the work with their own experiences in life. They process the ideas, comparing and contrasting, to determine whether or not the ideas presented in the work are those they can accept.

This last step is also devoted to understanding the figurative meaning of the work. This is done by discussing and revealing literary elements the work presents. Students can be asked to discuss figures of speech used by the author. Students can also be invited to contemplate the tone of the author in the work. Students can also be assigned to reveal the symbols. Several further analytical and interpretive activities can be done.

This step is basically the interpretive level, the figurative level. Because students' background experiences are obviously different from each other, the responses they get might be different from one another. This way, one particular idea can be seen from many different viewpoints or perspectives, resulting in different interpretations.

At this level, any interpretation cannot be judged as correct or wrong; interpretations are judged based on whether or not they are supported by evidence from the corresponding texts or works.

It is this concept which gives the attribute to literature as *poly-interpretable*.

The following section is an example of how the process was designed and developed in the writer's class. The works discussed in the unit was a short story by a famous flamboyant British writer, Oscar Wilde, (Brain, 2021), hence the title of this paper, *Teaching Grammar with Oscar Wilde*.

In discussing the short story, the writer tried to invite students to question the phrase *Cogito ergo sum*, which is understood as "I think, therefore I am."

Unit 8 *Cogito ergo sum?*

A. Previewing Language: The Conjunctions "And" and "Or"

The conjunctions "and" and "or" are sometimes used to mean "as a result" or "then". Please study the following examples:

- Bring the flowers into a warm room and they'll soon open.
- Stand over here and you'll be able to see it better.
- You should eat more or you will make yourself ill.

Try to find some more examples of this or write some more sentences of your own to show the emphasis.

B. Previewing Language: Inversion

Inversions are frequently used not only for aesthetics but also for emphasis. The frequently used patterns are:

1. Adverbial + predicate + subject

[\(Inversion: Definition with Examples | Learn English \(learngrammar.net\)\)](#)

- *Down the street lived the man and his wife without anyone suspecting that they were really spies for a foreign power.*
- *Only after the earthquake had taken place did the lack of safety measures become obvious.*

2. Predicative + linking verb + subject (Guffey, 2008, p. 40)

- *Also arrested were eight other suspects who allegedly worked secretly for ETA while maintaining the appearance of normal lives.*
- *Sitting in front is Michelle.*

Can you think of some other patterns? Share with examples.

Now, read the following short story carefully.

The Nightingale and the Rose

by Oscar Wilde

(<http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/NigRos.shtml>)

'She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses,' cried the young Student; 'but in all my garden there is no red rose.'

From her nest in the holm-oak tree the Nightingale heard him, and she looked out through the leaves, and wondered.

'No red rose in all my garden!' he cried, and his beautiful eyes filled with tears. 'Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched.'

'Here at last is a true lover,' said the Nightingale. 'Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his pace like pale Ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow.'

'The Prince gives a ball to-morrow night,' murmured the young Student, 'and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break.'

'Here indeed is the true lover,' said the Nightingale. 'What I sing of he suffers: what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market-place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, 'or can it be weighed out in the balance for gold.'

'The musicians will sit in their gallery,' said the young Student, 'and play upon their stringed instruments, and my love will dance to the sound of the harp and the violin. She will dance so lightly that her feet will not touch the floor, and the courtiers in their gay dresses will throng round her. But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her;' and he flung himself down on the grass, and buried his face in his hands, and wept.

'Why is he weeping?' asked a little Green Lizard, as he ran past him with his tail in the air.

'Why, indeed?' said a Butterfly, who was fluttering about after a sunbeam.

'Why, indeed?' whispered a Daisy to his neighbour, in a soft, low voice.

'He is weeping for a red rose,' said the Nightingale.

'For a red rose!' they cried; 'how very ridiculous!' and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

But the Nightingale understood the secret of the Student's sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love.

Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She passed through the grove like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed across the garden.

In the centre of the grass-plot was standing a beautiful Rose-tree, and when she saw it, she flew over to it, and lit upon a spray.

'Give me a red rose,' she cried, 'and I will sing you my sweetest song.'

But the Tree shook its head.

'My roses are white,' it answered; 'as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain. But go to my brother who grows round the old sun-dial, and perhaps he will give you what you want.'

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing round the old sun-dial.

'Give me a red rose,' she cried, 'and I will sing you my sweetest song.'

But the Tree shook its head.

'My roses are yellow,' it answered; 'as yellow as the hair of the mermaid who sits upon an amber throne, and yellower than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow before the mower comes with his scythe. But go to my brother who grows beneath the Student's window, and perhaps he will give you what you want.'

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing beneath the Student's window.

'Give me a red rose,' she cried, 'and I will sing you my sweetest song.'

But the Tree shook its head.

'My roses are red,' it answered, 'as red as the feet of the dove, and redder than the great fans of coral that wave and wave in the ocean-cavern. But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches, and I shall have no roses at all this year.'

'One red rose is all I want,' cried the Nightingale, 'only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?'

'There is a way,' answered the Tree; 'but it is so terrible that I dare not tell it to you.'

'Tell it to me,' said the Nightingale, 'I am not afraid.'

'If you want a red rose,' said the Tree, 'you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine.'

'Death is a great price to pay for a red rose,' cried the Nightingale, 'and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?'

So she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She swept over the garden like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed through the grove.

The young Student was still lying on the grass, where she had left him, and the tears were not yet dry in his beautiful eyes.

'Be happy,' cried the Nightingale, 'be happy; you shall have your red rose. I will build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with my own heart's-blood. All that I ask of you in return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy, though she is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense.'

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.

But the Oak-tree understood, and felt sad, for he was very fond of the little Nightingale who had built her nest in his branches.

'Sing me one last song,' he whispered; 'I shall feel very lonely when you are gone.'

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.

When she had finished her song the Student got lip, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

'She has form,' he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove - 'that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good.' And he went into his room, and lay down on his little pallet-bed, and began to think of his love; and, after a time, he fell asleep.

And when the Moon shone in the heavens the Nightingale flew to the Rose-tree, and set her breast against the thorn. All night long she sang with her breast against the thorn, and the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened. All night long she sang, and the thorn went deeper and deeper into her breast, and her life-blood ebbed away from her.

She sang first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl. And on the topmost spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvellous rose, petal following petal, as song followed song. Pale was it, at first, as the mist that hangs over the river - pale as the feet of the morning, and silver as the wings of the dawn. As the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver, as the shadow of a rose in a water-pool, so was the rose that blossomed on the topmost spray of the Tree.

But the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. 'Press closer, little Nightingale,' cried the Tree, 'or the Day will come before the rose is finished.'

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid.

And a delicate flush of pink came into the leaves of the rose, like the flush in the face of the bridegroom when he kisses the lips of the bride. But the thorn had not yet reached her heart, so the rose's heart remained white, for only a Nightingale's heart's-blood can crimson the heart of a rose.

And the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. 'Press closer, little Nightingale,' cried the Tree, 'or the Day will come before the rose is finished.'

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.



(The Nightingale and the Rose by Sakiimi on DeviantArt)

And the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky. Crimson was the girdle of petals, and crimson as a ruby was the heart.

But the Nightingale's voice grew fainter, and her little wings began to beat, and a film came over her eyes. Fainter and fainter grew her song, and she felt something choking her in her throat.

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea.

'Look, look!' cried the Tree, 'the rose is finished now;' but the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart.

And at noon the Students opened his window and looked out.

'Why, what a wonderful piece of luck!' he cried; 'here is a red rose! I have never seen any rose like it in all my life. It is so beautiful that I am sure it has a long Latin name;' and he leaned down and plucked it.

Then he put on his hat, and ran up to the Professor's house with the rose in his hand.

The daughter of the Professor was sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog was lying at her feet.

'You said that you would dance with me if I brought you a red rose,' cried the Student. 'Here is the reddest rose in all the world. You will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love you.'

But the girl frowned.

'I am afraid it will not go with my dress,' she answered; 'and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers.'

'Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful,' said the Student angrily; and he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it.

'Ungrateful!' said the girl. 'I tell you what, you are very rude; and, after all, who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has;' and she got up from her chair and went into the house.

'What a silly thing Love is,' said the Student as he walked away. 'It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics.'

So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read.

C. And Thinking It through

1. Is love better than life as is believed by the Nightingale?
2. Or is logic better than love as is believed by the student?
3. Pay attention to how the author talks about the nightingale and the student. Can you feel the different tones? With whom do you think the author shows more sympathy?
4. What one sentence can you write to summarize the message you get from the story?

In the writer's experience, however, the steps could not be finished in one session of the lecture. A thorough discussion on the previewing language section lasted more than the first half of the allocated time. Similarly, thorough discussion of the work required more than the second half of the allocated time. Twice or three times, the writer tried to cover all the steps, with the units lasting for two sessions. For some other units, concentration and emphasis were given to the first three steps, leaving the fourth step as an enrichment task. From the experience the writer learned that careful and thorough time management is indeed necessary.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Enlightened by the pragmatic spirit that the essence of Literature is to "imitate both to delight and teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand", this article is an attempt to present a pattern of presenting literary works as a means of learning and improving English language competence. In this pattern, the session is devoted to making use of grammatical aspect to improve literary interpretation.

Careful design and time management can be both challenges and obstacles to the successful instruction. When it is successful, students will get double advantages. When it fails, however, students may get none of the two.

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