

# Exploiting Narrative Literary Texts through Questions in Reading Comprehension

Davy Budiono

**Abstract.** *Teacher's creativity is needed in developing the teaching materials for reading comprehension. This assumption is concluded based on a study that revealed that most students and teacher candidates of English are having serious in both constructing and providing answers to inferential and analytical questions. This article discusses the selection and the exploitation of suitable narrative literary materials for teaching reading comprehension. This paper begins with the discussion of the advantages of using narrative literary texts in teaching reading comprehension. It is followed by a short description on how literary texts can be exploited by constructing closed and open questions based on Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension levels. However, as teachers of English it is essential that the communicative aspects of language learning should be kept in focus as individual answers may arise.*

**Key words:** *narrative literary text, content, context, theme, taxonomy.*

## Introduction

In every discussion of language teaching, there are always elements of literature for it is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching. In fact, in language teaching, literature can help the students master the vocabulary and the grammar of the language as well as the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A number of activities that involve the students' application of these skills can be developed with the reading of literary works.

It was not until recently that narrative literary texts are still considered inappropriate to be used as teaching material. A number of teachers claimed that reading narrative literary texts is wasting time, as it does not display the latest up-to-date information like scientific and popular texts do. Others argued that narrative literary texts bring confusion in understanding the contents or even in finding the subject matter of what the texts are about. Actually, narrative literary texts offer a lot of advantages in reading comprehension teaching compared to other reading materials. Seeing that the current materials for reading comprehension are lacking of literary texts, in this paper, I suggest teachers of English give literary texts a bigger portion. The teachers can use narrative literary works, like short stories as the material in reading comprehension classes.

## **Advantages Offered in Using Literary Texts**

Stern (1987: 47) claimed that literary texts offer many advantages to be used as reading comprehension materials. Linguistically, literary texts can help the students to improve their reading comprehension besides helping them to acquire new vocabularies within the texts. Culturally, literary texts provide the knowledge and understanding of others' cultures within the content of the texts. And personally, literary texts help the students to gain better understanding with themselves as individuals as well as their relationships with the people around them, making them to be more mature and thoughtful readers.

The first advantage of using literary texts is language proficiency improvements. Iser (1978: 147) also claimed that all elements of literature, plot, character, setting, and theme, can help the students to promote their reading comprehension. Those elements present special challenges to readers for they are demanded to put into practice their specific reading strategies.

The second advantage is that literary texts are enjoyable. This is in line with the affective theory that claims that learning process would be easier if the learners enjoy what they learn. Literary texts are supposed to give pleasure to students because they mainly deal with interesting human issues. High School students will be more interested in narrative passages, for an instance, rather than the scientific ones. When students like what they read, comprehension will be easier to be achieved because unconsciously they will develop reading habit when they enjoy the material.

Literary texts can also help the students understand the culture of the target language and of the native language. The students will be able to understand how different cultures perceive something differently and what values are considered to be universal. Carter and Long (1991: 2) stated that literature expresses the most significant ideas and sentiments of human beings and teaching literature represents a means by which students can be put in touch with a range of expression, often of universal value and validity, over historical periods. Displaying a literary text within a cultural model enables the students to understand and appreciate the differences of cultures and ideologies.

Finally, reading literary texts encourages the students' mental growths. When the students are able to appreciate and understand cultural ideologies, they will realize how they function within their society and culture. The students are expected to be able to formulate their own philosophical concepts based on their experiences. The collective experiences of human beings lie in the literary texts. Brumfit (1979: 119) stated that the process of reading is a process of meaning creation by integrating one's own needs, understanding, and expectations with a written text.

## Literary Texts in Reading Comprehension

According to Mary Finocchiaro (1974: 77), reading is an activity of getting meanings out from printed or written materials. It can be inferred that reading, as an activity of inferring meanings, is a thinking or a cognitive process because, in getting meanings, one is obliged to use his mind.

Comprehension, according to Kennedy (1981: 41), is the ability of the students to find, analyze, understand, and interpret ideas. In comprehending a written text the students have to connect their new knowledge with the existing knowledge and facts in the text.

There are certain factors that have essential roles in reading comprehension. They are the understanding of the vocabulary and the understanding of the main ideas. When these factors are fulfilled reading comprehension will progress smoothly as the students will not find any difficulties in relating their new acquired knowledge with their background knowledge.

Literary texts are written works of art. That is how the discussion on the context of interpretation of literary texts, unlike ordinary reading text where there is only one possible interpretation to be found is polyinterpretable. It means that there is no single meaning for the interpretation of a literary text. An interpretation of a literary text may differ from an individual to another. The difference in interpretation is caused by individual perception and experience that influence in understanding a particular context. Of course, there is only a single meaning in a literary text's plain sense or what is written literally, but there is plurality of meanings in its implications or what is beyond the text.

In judging the varieties of interpretation, students should be made aware that there are no right or wrong terms in interpreting a literary work. It's just a matter of sensibility. It means that teachers cannot judge the students' perspectives but they should try to analyze whether it is drawn based on logical or sensible ways of thinking. The interpretation process of a literary text might be diagrammatically explained as follows:

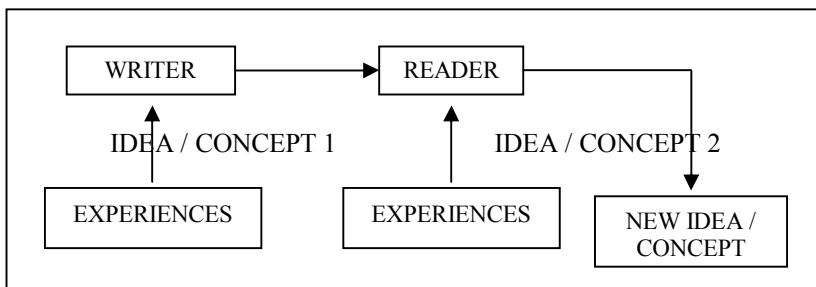


Diagram 1: Interpretation process of a literary text

The diagram indicates that in the literary interpretation process the writer is trying to express his idea or concept based on his personal experiences to the readers through the text (Idea / Concept 1). The reader may also have his own idea or concept that is also based on his experiences (Idea / Concept 2). In interpreting the text, the reader compares his idea or concept to the writer's. The process results in a new idea or concept called interpretation.

However, this process of interpretation requires the reader's creative imagination combined with his/her background knowledge in order to produce a sensible interpretation. Iser (1978: 22) stated that the meaning of literary work is related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it together.

### **Things to Consider in Using Literary Texts in Reading Class**

In selecting appropriate narrative literary texts as reading comprehension materials, the teacher should consider a number of important factors: genres of the text, students' language proficiency levels and the text themes.

The first thing to consider in selecting the text for reading comprehension is deciding the genres of the text. The teacher would have to decide what kind of literary text that suits best since not all types of literary texts are suitable to be used as the material for teaching reading comprehension. There are novels, short stories and dramas. Of the types of literary texts, short stories, novels, poems and drama, short stories are highly recommended because they do not take long time to read and provide variety of ideas and themes.

Level of difficulty should be also considered because comprehension access will be restricted if the students cannot attain the basic level of comprehension. A difficulty in understanding the literal meaning of a text will also decrease the students' motivation in reading. It is essential that the level of difficulty of the selected literary texts is not far beyond the students' proficiency level. It means that the level of difficulty for the vocabulary and ideas presented in the selected passage has to be challenging enough for the students

Finally, in selecting suitable texts the teacher would also have to be sure that the students are familiar to the theme. It is recommended for the teachers to select a literary text that suits the students' interest because it would be easier for the students to comprehend the content. Themes that suit the students' interests or suit the themes in the given syllabus are preferable.

### **Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension**

Questions are often classified according to their contents. Classification by contents requires the teacher to think of the taxonomy of reading comprehension. The taxonomy of reading comprehension identifies and classifies the types of question. Among the taxonomies

recognized, one of them is Barrett's taxonomy. Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension is considered to be representative of a reading taxonomy that can be used when developing instructional activity, identifying questions, and specifying reading comprehension instruction (Heiman et. Al 1981. Dupuis and Askov 1982). According to Dupuis and Askov (1982), Barrett's taxonomy of Reading Comprehension provides a useful hierarchy of comprehension as there are five comprehension levels: literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation and appreciation. Often these five levels are classified into four levels only: literal, inferential, evaluation and appreciation.

According to Dupuis and Askov (1982), reorganization level is included in the literal level. Literal comprehension requires the students to recognize or recall ideas, information, or happenings explicitly in the selection. Recall tasks are often done more than the other comprehension tasks, inference and evaluation, for they are fundamental to the students' ability to deal with other types of comprehension. It is clear that the literal questions are to be given prior to the other levels.

Inferential comprehension demands thinking and imagination that goes beyond the text. In this case the readers use the ideas and information explicitly stated, their intuition and personal experiences as a basis for conjecturing and hypothesizing. Conjectures or hypotheses derived in this manner may be along convergent or divergent lines, depending on the nature of the task and the reading materials involved. Dupuis and Askov (1982) claimed that narrative passages deal with more divergent of creative conjectures because of the open-ended possibilities provided by such writing. Expository writing, on the other hand, may permit more convergent hypotheses because of their content.

Evaluation deals with judgment and focuses on qualities of accuracy, acceptability, worth, or probability of occurrence. In essence, evaluation requires students to make judgments dealing with qualities.

Appreciation deals with the psychological and aesthetic impact of the selection including the knowledge and emotional response to literary techniques, forms, styles and structures.

In terms of Barrett's taxonomy, a number of questions may precede, accompany, or follow the teaching process of reading comprehension. The purpose of giving these questions to the students is to guide them to understand the content and the context of the text better.

Carter and Long (1991:36) classified these questions according to their purposes as:

- Low-order or closed questions
- High-order or open questions

Low-order or closed questions are questions that attempt to retrieve factual information, literal meanings or the basic propositions or content of a text. In Barrett's taxonomy, these kinds of questions are included in the literal and reorganization levels since they focus on the

factual content of a text. These questions require an accurate, information-based response. They are useful in the preliminary orientation of the text.

On the contrary, the high-order or open questions deal less with literal meanings or factual content and deal more with the learner's own responses, inferences, knowledge and experience of the world. These questions are acknowledged in the inferential, evaluation and appreciation levels as they focus on the imaginative or symbolic content of a text or the context of meaning of which it generates. These questions will tend to be open to exploration and probing investigation. There is no exact answer for high-order questions.

In their research on the student-teacher's ability and competence in constructing and providing answers to different types of questions with the samples of S-1 students of the English Department from various universities in Surabaya, Harjanto and Prijambodo (1993: 34-43) revealed that most students are capable of constructing literal questions (82.3%) while the percentage of students that are capable in constructing inferential and evaluation questions are falling as respective 6.3% and 2.5%. They also found out that only half of the students in their research could provide correct answers to the literal questions that they had constructed (54.4%) while only the minority could provide answers to inferential and evaluation questions (5% and 1.3%). Here we can conclude that most students are still having problems in dealing with inferential and evaluation questions both in constructing and providing answers to the inferential questions.

### **Text Exploitation through Questions**

After the students finish reading the text, the teacher should give closed questions to them to review what they have read. These questions should be related to the propositions or information of the text. If the students can answer these questions correctly, as the answers laid in the text, the teacher can assume that they have understood the content of the text. These questions can also be used to direct students to focus on important parts of the text where the context lies.

In giving open questions, the teachers would have to keep in mind that the writer is doing more than just telling a story. The writer is also saying something about human feelings, needs, and relationships. The teachers would have to make the students think about the content of the text and about their own life experiences. Through this process, helped by open questions, the students will not only define their responses, but will also add their ideas, or concepts to the text. That is why, as I mentioned earlier, there are no exact correct answers to open questions. By doing this, they will feel that this way of reading is more exciting than the usual way. In the process, they will also become more mature and thoughtful readers.

Below is an example of a narrative literary text together with some questions that can be used to exploit them and their suggested or possible answers.

### **The Sparrow** Ivan Turgenev

*I was returning from a day's hunting and was walking toward the house along an alley in my garden. My dog was running ahead of me.*

*Suddenly she slowed her pace and began to advance stealthily, as though she had caught scent of game.*

*I look down the path and saw a young sparrow with a steak of yellow near its beak and a bit puff on its head. It had fallen out of the nest. (A strong wind was swaying the birch trees.) The tiny bird sat there trying helplessly to use its barely grown wings.*

*My dog was stealing up to the infant sparrow when, abruptly, an old black-chested bird fell like a stone right in front of the dog's face, and with all its feathers standing on end, misshapen, uttering a desperate and pitiful chirp, it hopped once and then again in the direction of the dog's open jaw.*

*The bird had thrown itself in front of the dog to shield its young one, but its own small body was trembling with terror, its little voice was frenzied and hoarse, it was numb with fright – it was sacrificing itself!*

*What a huge monster the dog must have seemed to the mother sparrow! Nevertheless, it could not bear to stay on its high, safe perch in the tree. A force stronger than its will to remain alive made it hurl itself to the rescue.*

*My treasure, the dog, stopped still and then backed up. Evidently she, too, recognized that force. . . .*

*I hastened to call off the puzzled dog and went on my way, awed.*

*Yes, do not laugh. I was awed by that small, heroic bird – by its impulse of love.*

*Love, I felt more than ever, is stronger than death and the fear of death. Only through love is life sustained and nourished.*

\*\*\*\*\*

- Closed questions (literal level)
- 1. Why did the dog suddenly slow down and begin to move ahead with stealth?  
Suggested answer:  
*The dog suddenly slowed down and began to move ahead with stealth because she had caught scent of a young sparrow fallen out from its nest.*
- 2. What made the dog stop and back up?  
Suggested answer:  
*The dog stopped and backed up because she recognized the mother sparrow's sacrificing force to rescue the young sparrow.*

3. What feeling caused the mother bird to risk death?

Suggested answer:

*The mother sparrow's impulse of love that is stronger than the fear of death caused her to risk her own death to rescue the young sparrow.*

The literal questions are given to make sure that the reader follows the story and understands what it is about. It is imperative that these literal questions be given in a chronological order, so that the students may recall the story from where it starts until the point where it ends. From this literal understanding then the students can be guided to the beyond-the-text comprehension with the inferential, evaluation and appreciation questions.

- Open questions (inferential and evaluation levels)

1. What do you think the author is trying to say to you through this story? (inferential level)

Possible answer:

*He is trying to say that love is the most important thing in our life and love needs sacrifice, like the love that was shown by the mother sparrow.*

The answer to inferential question is implicit. Through this question the reader will get the main idea or the moral of the story. The student's perspective toward the topic (in this case, love) may probably be based on his personal experiences. His perspective may vary from enthusiastic, consent, or even skeptical.

2. Do you also believe that love is a force stronger than the will to survive? Explain your answer! (evaluation level)

Possible answer:

*Yes, I do. I think love is stronger than the will to survive because love needs sacrifice to maintain it. For an instance, the parents' love to their children will require them to work hard to maintain their welfare. Parents would do anything to keep their children in safety even if it means that they would risk their own lives.*

This question deals with the reader's judgment and acceptability to the idea stated in the text. However, answers to such a question may differ from individual to individual based on personal experiences.

However the example shown here is compliant. Selecting text, once again will have to consider the time allocated in reading class. Longer texts will seem tedious while shorter texts are sometimes lacking in substantial discussions. It is important to keep in mind that questions given by the teacher will have to be systematic, clear and objective-based for the literal ones.



## Conclusion

Using narrative literary texts as the materials in reading comprehension brings many advantages to the students. First, they improve the students' reading comprehension skills. Second, literary texts introduce foreign cultures' aspects and ideas to the students. Finally, literary texts enable the students to be thoughtful readers.

As the interpretation of literary texts stem from culture differences, it is necessary that teachers provide the students with additional guidance in getting the messages from the texts. However, the teacher should respect the individuality of the students' responses to a literary text. As the students have more ease and confidence in their ability to read a literary text, they will gain useful knowledge contain universal humanity values that can be applied in their lives.

## References

- Brumfit, C.J. 1979. *Readers for Foreign Learners of English*. British Council.
- Budiono, Davy. 2002. *Teaching Reading Through Narrative Literary Texts By Using Barrett's Taxonomy-Based Questions*. Surabaya: Magister Scientiae FKIP, Widya Mandala Catholic University.
- Campbell, N. 1987. *Adapted Literary Texts and the EFL Reading Programme*. *ELT Journal*, 2, 41-58.
- Carter, Ronald and Michael N. Long. 1991. *Teaching Literature*. New York: Longman Publishing.
- Dupuis, Mary M. and Eunice N. Askov. 1982. *Content Area Reading*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Finocchiaro, Mary. 1974. *Developing Skills in English as a Second Language: From Theory to Practice*. New York: Regents Publishers Company.
- Harjanto, Ignatius and Luluk Prijambodo. 1993. *Preliminary Study on Student-Teachers' Competence in Exploiting the Reading Teaching Materials*. Surabaya: PSP Bahasa Inggris FKIP, Widya Mandala Catholic University.
- Iser, Wolfgang 1978. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Kennedy, Eddie C. 1981. *Methods in Teaching Developmental Reading*. Itasca: F.E. Peacock Publishers Inc.
- Lerner, Laurence D. 1954. *English Literature: An Interpretation for Students Abroad*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Long, Michael H. and Charlene J. Sato. 1983. *Classroom Foreigner Talk Discourse: Forms and Functions of Teachers' Questions*. In H.W. Seliger and M.H. Long eds. *Classroom-oriented Research in Second Language Acquisition*, 268-285 Rowley, Massachusetts: New Burry House.
- Stern, Susan L. 1987. *Expanded Dimensions to Literature in ESL/EFL: An Integrated Approach*. English Teaching Forum, 4, 47-54.