Reading and Meaning:
Teaching Narration and Interpretation in a Multilingual Context.
An Interuniversity Project

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Introduction

Our paper outlines a literature-teaching project of an inter-university character focussed at improving the advanced and specialist reading skills that are called on from undergraduate students reading modern languages whose degree includes the study of literature. The project counts on collaboration among university departments of English, French and Italian, and is scheduled to run from September 2011 to December 2013. The Catalan Government’s University Grants and Research Agency, AGAUR has awarded the project a Teaching-Quality Improvement Grant (Millora de Qualitat Docent). Bearing in mind the calendar indicated above, our undertaking is—very obviously—still at an incipient phase. This current paper therefore is a necessarily succinct description of what might be termed the route map of our project; we set out its general parameters and what we hope will be its development and outcomes. Further papers are planned at later stages in which we will assess initial results; following the closure of the working period in 2013, we will also disseminate our final and general conclusions.

In sections one and two, we outline the rationale behind the project and present the general approaches and objectives that should be pursued to achieve it. Moving on
to the praxis, in section three we describe group-work and classroom methodologies, although we have obviously avoided a thorough account of our working calendar in this type of communication. To the extent that this is feasible at such an early stage, we close this account with the outcomes we expect to attain and the eventual activities we hope to successfully undertake, such as publications and a dedicated conference.

**Justifying the Project**

Our project derives from discussions with fellow literature teachers who were also very concerned about the failure of their courses to satisfactorily prepare students as successful, professional readers of literary works, sensitive to the deeper implications of literature, and competent interpreters of the symbolic understated meanings hidden behind the narrative surface of the works they are required to study.

In our discussions, we identified the following situation, which we can broadly term the “problematics”, and that we aim to provide an answer to throughout this project. Students taking a degree in a modern foreign language, in which literature is very often a fundamental component, face a series of obstacles. Beyond the obvious difficulty of the language itself there are other factors such as an urgent need to discern the basic elements of study required for the effective analysis and comprehension of literature. Many early-stage students, perhaps even the majority, are simply not equipped to read or discuss literature at anything other than the purely superficial level of plot development, and this, in turn, is felt in the reading and study of literary texts by more advanced students at higher levels. The aim of literature
syllabuses, on the other hand, is to address issues that are far deeper than the purely plot-based (questions such as sources, style, characterisation, thematic concerns, gender and genre concerns, historical context, etc.) and this discrepancy—between the objectives of specific course programmes and students’ prior understanding of what the study of literature involves—can create considerable confusion among students and not infrequently leads to a sense of disorientation and disillusion.

Bearing in mind this scenario, we drew up a project that aimed to develop student’s skills as what we term ‘professional readers’; this involves enabling them to read beyond the purely narrative level and to perceive the manner in which the creative construct of a given literary work is established in a complex series of ways, a clear understanding of which is essential to the effective study of literature. Once the broad outlines of the project had been discussed and agreed upon, we established a working group (12 members from three Catalan public universities) to put these ideas into practice.

By systematically developing our students’ understanding of this critical aspect of reading literature, we therefore aim tofacilitate the ability to read, assess and discuss literature in a more fully engaged and sensitive manner, to transcend a common tendency amongst undergraduate students to limit literary assessment to the purely plot-based and to equip students with a ‘professional’ vision of how literature works.

2. Approaches and Objectives
In this project, our objective is to act directly on the approaches taken to teaching and learning literature in an undergraduate context. In this sense, whilst recognising their differences in scope, our aim would be to apply our study to both Grado and Licenciatura courses (that is, the old-format and new-format degrees within the Spanish system), thereby providing a nexus and continuity between the new Bologna programmes and those of the previous type. In view of this, we would also wish to highlight that the project aims to be applicable to a broad range of class levels and types, from first-year students through to final-year undergraduates (though we do not exclude the possibility of also extending this to postgraduate classes).

More precisely, our initial aim in addressing the problematics outlined above is to highlight the centrality of the narrative persona in works of literature of diverse generic form, historic origin and language. We emphasise, at this point, that this project intends to work with all genres of literature, and not simply the more usual primary focus of narrative studies, which is novelistic fiction. We aim to focus on texts of literary fiction from earlier periods of literature as well as those written within the last decade or so. The perspective would thereby embrace literary representations of a proven and consolidated artistic value (works of an unquestionable canonical status) in addition to contemporary writing of relevance and broad acclaim, attempting to affirm that the fundamental creative value of the narrator is, in effect, of perennial importance. By exploring the nature of the narrator (epistolary, third-person, omniscient, etc.), or the implicit narrative view (of especial validity when referring to genres such as Drama and Poetry in which this literary
figure may not be explicitly present) and the narrator’s role, our objective is to intervene directly in students’ understanding of the role of active, critical reading and thereby to heighten an awareness of the means by which the authors of the selected works develop their particular artistic ‘agendas’. Such agendas, as perceived through the narrator (or narrative surrogate), include the attribution of sympathy and/or antipathy towards specific characters, the construction of moral or ethical frameworks in which to contextualise the themes and action of the work itself, the manner in which historical or cultural issues are selected and presented and the forms in which the reader is, in effect, ‘manipulated’ towards specific interpretations, privileging certain readings over others.

This project therefore addresses the following issues: (1) the manner in which the narrative persona and the author are separate entities; (2) the consequences on the study of literature of understanding that no narrator is ever fully trustworthy; (3) according the status of ‘character’ to the narrator; (4) understanding contemporary readers’ possible response to the narrator and his/her apparent aims; (5) generally, comprehending that all narratives involve a complex relationship with the reader that is never passive or ‘innocent’.

More specifically, however (since all grand expressions of intention must ultimately come down to the nitty-gritty of daily praxis if they are to be of any meaningful value), we are aiming at the following concerns:

• To assess the nature and function of any narrator in any narrative (episode selection; narrative sympathy; narrative ideology; narrator type; omniscience; omnipresence; narrative dysfunction). This involves the introduction to key issues
affecting this question within the ambit of Reader-Response Criticism and implies assessment through access to short stories; plot summaries; extracts from particular works.

• To assess the effects on the hearer/reader of narrative type. Similarly, this will be assessed through access to short stories; plot summaries; extracts from particular works.

• To analyse narrative perspective as represented in related but distinct genre (film, drama, poetry) in which a narrator understood in strict terms is not, or may not be, present. We thereby aim to assess the form in which this perspective, and its objectives and mechanisms, are accounted for in alternative ways. We term this ‘narrative surrogacy’ and our intention at this point is to highlight the manner in which narrative surrogacy acts in precisely parallel ways to the formal narrator. Again, this will be tackled through examining extracts from particular works.

• To evaluate and comprehend the extra-textual objectives that a given narrator may attain through narrative orientation (for instance, epistolary narrative as apparently intentionally visceral and subjective and therefore suitable to Romanticism and revolution). We will also consider the limitations and objections to this particular approach.

• To evaluate and comprehend the manner in which narrative type functions in conjunction with literary form (for example, epistolary/first-person non-omniscient narrative as a ‘heightener’ of confusion are more suitable to tales of mystery or suspense; third-person narrative is a more suitable vehicle for apparent narrative transparency, etc.).
3. Methodologies

The Methodology of Group Coordination: Communication and Group Structure

Communication amongst the members MQD group is established fundamentally by the use of collaborative e-tools such as Teamlab (http://teamlab.com/) and Posterous (https://posterous.com/), both of which have been developed for multiplex group coordination in a Web 2.0 context. Teamlab allows for centralised communication from a coordinating committee, facilitating a working calendar, assignation of projects and activities (as well as indicating responsibility for these and enabling precise monitoring); a wiki, a blog and an inter-group chat engine. This will ensure that all formal group interaction and coordination is available to all members synchronically and at a single site, independent of their own physical location. Posterous allows for any Internet content to be made available to the group through the users’ own regular e-mail, thus allowing for immediate diffusion of any relevant content affecting the project. The group is structured into an overall team leader, ultimately responsible for overseeing the correct implementation of all objectives. But the group has also designated a number of functions to individual members, such as meetings coordinator, web coordinator, publications coordinator and conference coordinator whose roles, if self-explanatory, are absolutely essential to the effective running of the project. In all events, to ensure group cohesion and the successful monitoring of activities, we have established a calendar of monthly attendance-based meetings that complement the virtual tools outlined above.

The Methodology of the Project in Application: Classroom Practice

The essential methodological focus of the practical dimension to this project is conventional attendance-based classroom teaching and—with the possible
exception of certain tutorials—will be undertaken during the normal teaching activity and timetable of each member.

However, in addition to a conventional review of aspects of the literature being taught, our work will be carried out through dedicated class activity, with students’ reaction guided and encouraged in this ambit towards reflecting more profoundly on narrative perspective within the works being studied, and therefore includes regular student questionnaires aimed at fostering reflection on their learning process and at assessing this classroom practice; monthly tutorials through which students can further reflect on this approach to literature and raise any particular concerns; group presentations; close-reading exercises; guided in-class discussion; essay assignments focusing on highly specific pragmatic, stylistic and narrative aspects of the works in question; and a course-final questionnaire to assist in our global assessment of the project.

4. Outcomes and Further Activities

In light of the overview provided above, we currently foresee that this project and its attendant methodology will lead to the following core results:

1. An enhancement of the ability of undergraduates studying foreign literature to read critically and to develop advanced reading skills in a non-native language. We believe that the approaches set out in this proposal will lead to significant and demonstrable improvement in students’ ability to successfully negotiate the demands
of their literature studies, most specifically by empowering their capacity to act as effective, sensitive and informed interpreters of textual communication.

2. Through provision of the analytical tools and approaches that facilitate improved appreciation and understanding of literary texts (going beyond plot-based assessment to embrace a deeper understanding of narrative strategies, literary stylistics and issues of textual pragmatics), students will thereby gain greater acquisition of the transferable, transversal skills required in their university studies.

3. Reinforcing students’ broader cognitive and linguistic competence, at passive and active levels, in the foreign language of their choice, thus also contributing to a more effective acquisition of instrumental language abilities and skills required for the effective conclusion of their studies in modern languages.

Beyond these measurable core expectations, we would additionally draw attention to a further more general outcome that we firmly believe will be given rise to: by professionalising the act of critical reading, this will provide students with a solid foundation in a range of skills needed for successful life-long learning—namely, independent critical thought; capacity for analysis; understanding of discourse objectives and authorial intention and manipulation; sensitivity to textual register and tone—and will help in the fulfilment of preparing students for a more effective social role by permitting them to apply their studies in a practical manner to the complex, multi-skilled demands of a knowledge-based society, fully in accordance with the spirit of the Bologna Process.
Following the application of our strategies for teaching innovation, we anticipate significant improvement in our students’ capacity to function as effective, sensitive readers of literature. To evaluate the extent to which our project has attained these objectives, we will have the following material for assessment at our disposal:

1. The results of regular student questionnaires carried out over the period of the project’s application.
2. Completed essay assignments.
3. A course-final questionnaire focussing on students’ evaluation of their learning process.
4. Data from regular support tutorials.
5. Group members’ final report.

This evaluation material will be processed and assessed by an administrative-support colleague from January to April 2013, in accordance with established methodological procedures for such data assessment. The fundamental purpose of this assessment phase is to determine through the material outlined in points 1-5 above (a) the extent of students’ positive reaction to the teaching innovation proposed here; and (b) the extent to which this student reaction is in accordance—or not—with our prior expectations. Where this will have been possible to determine, we will also aim to contrast this qualitative data with test-group data from other students.

From May 2013, diffusion of the overall project will be undertaken through the preparation of articles detailing the project, its results and its conclusions. In addition to Spanish and Catalan journals, we will be seeking to communicate this project to a broader, more international audience through publications such as *The International Journal for Academic Development*. We also aim to present the project to teaching
conferences in accordance with the events determined most suitable by the conference coordinator, and intend to use the insights gained throughout this experience in the writing and publishing of two manuals: a teachers’ manual for approaching the teaching of texts in the literature class; and a students’ manual for approaching the reading of texts in the literature class. Finally, under the supervision of the project leader, a detailed report will be drawn up on the degree of attainment of the group’s objectives as reflected in the results collected, processed and analysed. Diffusion of this report, as such and in derived formats such as aspect-specific articles, will be made available to the broader academic community through publication and conferences. Additional outlets for such diffusion are the International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the London Review of Education or Teaching in Higher Education; and at the Higher Education Academy Annual Conference in the United Kingdom.

Documentary sources of relevance that underlie this project and pertain to the ambit of innovation include the following:

**Selected Bibliography**


WATSON, KEN, Research and Innovation in the Teaching of Literature in Australian Secondary Schools: the Last Thirty Years.