

**The missing link
A fondation course
in Literature ***

Pr. Si Abderrahmane Arab
Institut des langues étrangères
Université d'Alger

The Missing Link : a foundation course in literature *

Pr. Si Abderrahmane Arab



What I propose to do in this paper is to present the theoretical groundwork, the guiding principles and the format of a book currently being published , entitled **Bridging The Cap**. This book has been designed by the Literary Didactics Research Group of the Department of English of the University of Algiers for First year students embarking on a degree in English Studies.

This is to say at the outset that bridge-building business-the theme of the present conference, I believe has been with us for quite some time now ; as a matter-of-fact since 1988... when we took stock of our preliminary investigations regarding the teaching of Literature in Tertiary Education.

Those preliminary investigations included :

- 1) an assessment of the teaching practice as obtained (and still obtains, alas !) in our universities ;
- 2) an analysis of the Secondary textbooks in use then, i.e., **New Lines, Midlines and Think it Over** ;
- 3) an assessment of the papers of the 1987-88 English Department entrance examination ;
- 4) a survey-questionnaire put to the **licence** students of the University of Algiers.

Our findings were summed up in a paper presented at the Twenty-Fourth Higher Education Teachers of English Conference¹.

Let me quote from the paper to make my point clear :

A First year syllabus in literary studies is not only desirable but also feasible along the following lines :

- (i) integration of the various dimensions of literature (linguistic, cultural, stylistic) and four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) ;
- (ii) extensive use of the students' communicative competence ;
- (iii) text selection based on linguistic and cultural accessibility ;
- (iv) emphasis on genre study and literary-critical terminology ;
- (v) extending of the scope of Eng. Lit. so as to include samples from the various literatures of the English-speaking world².

1. Philip Hobsbaum et al eds, **Channels of Communication, Papers from the HETE Conference**. (Glasgow : HETE 88 and Departement of English Literature), 1992.

2. Ibid., pp. 73-74.

That statement of purpose was all nice and good ; but it still had to be translated in terms of attainable pedagogical objectives, backed by an appropriate educational theory. Let us have the theory first, starting with a very down to earth question : why teach literature at all ?

The purpose of teaching Literature in an E.F.L. context is :

- (i) to inculcate a thorough competence and performance of the English **language**;
- (ii) to familiarize students with the various literary **genres** by enacting certain recognition strategies applied to the characteristic structures of fiction, poetry, drama ;
- (III) to have a better understanding of the **societies** where English Literature is written and read ;
- (iv) ultimately to evaluate the literariness of a text, i.e. the sum total of devices used in order to jolt us into recognition, and eventually, evaluation.

Each of these goals will be reached in the following sequence :

Year I : language-based approach ;

Year II : genre-based approach ;

Year III : literary-historical approach ;

Year IV : literary-critical approach.

This four-dimensional, graded method³ would enable us to focus, in each year of the curriculum, on that aspect of the literary text that would best respond to, and cater for the student's cognitive and performative capabilities.

This means, for the course designer, filling in the following course description outline (which can be used for any discipline/module be it in Secondary or Tertiary Education) :

3. For a reasoned account of the whole procedure, see, by the present author, "Literature Teaching in Maghrebi Universities : towards a redeployment", in **El-Moubarriz**, revue périodique académique, publiée par l'Ecole Normale Supérieure des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, janvier-juin 1993. This paper was originally presented at the Maghrebi Conference on Literature and Linguistics, University of Fes, December 1991.

Proposed

COURSE DESCRIPTION OUTLINE

YEAR OF THE CURRICULUM :

COURSE TITLE :

I. OBJECTIVES set for the student in terms of

(i) knowledge,

(ii) skills.

II. SYLLABUS

(i) course content

(ii) reading list (which should vary every three years and not remain with us **ad vitam eternam** !)

III. TECHNIQUES AND METHODS

No airy-fairy answer such as **cours magistral** (lecture) or **travaux dirigés** (practicals) will do. What is required is an explicit formulation of each activity type ; e.g. in what ways the exercises designed for Second Year students differ from those intended for Fourth Year students.

IV. ASSESSMENT FORMAT

Types of exercises which best evaluate the student's acquisitions and performance in view of the objectives set.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

VI. AREAS OF COORDINATION with other courses/modules of the same year .

But before coming to that, we had first to determine, in a rough-and-ready way, the profile of the Algerian student and to take stock of the constraints which we are called to cope with in the academic environment here and now.

Our First-Year student is a young adult (female in general) with a low level of linguistic competence (of the Lower Intermediate level, to be more specific). She (we might as well use the feminine gender !) has no experience whatsoever with foreign literature ; her exposure to the Arabic language literature is generally tinged — not to say tainted — with a certain scholasticism (of which content orientation, rote learning and teacher-centeredness are the dominant features).

She has been brought up in a Berbero-Arab Islamic environment where obedience to authority, be it parental or institutional, is still the rule⁴.

As a result of the down-grading of the status of the French language or of the suppression of other European languages altogether, she is further cut off from the cultures of the English-speaking world ; hence the need to make allowance for a widening cultural gap ... and a threatening 'pidginisation' of English ! In a more pedestrian way, she is one of a cohort of fellow-students scrambling for scraps of knowledge in over-crowded lecture halls and in libraries pathetically depleted of any up-to-date material.

This is to underline at once the need for us to approach very cautiously any 'revolutionary' teaching methods that do not take into account our present predicament. In other words we must make the best of the habits acquired by our students—even if they may seem **zaouia**-esque.

Therefore sticking to the traditional trial of teacher-text-student, occasionally enlivened by the film or video version of a set book, may not be such a poor bargain after all.

This does not preclude us from trying to free the student from the authoritarianism which she has been subjected to in the Secondary, by making use of the liberative potential of Literature.

This is to underline the central role of the teacher. He must rightfully deserve the title of **sheikh** so lavishly conferred upon him students. Furthermore the study of Literature must not be regarded as an end in itself ; it must be seen in the broader context of university education, i.e. one that ensures the formation of the student's intellectual and critical faculties and therefore contributes to the advancement of the Nation as a whole.

Bearing these broad data in mind, we came up with the conclusion that the only viable way in which Literature could be taught to the First Years was by building upon the students experience in the Secondary while gradually edging them towards the requirements and demands of the University.

This is why we have adopted the language-based approach ; one that does not exclude however the cultural and stylistic dimensions.

These were then the theoretical foundations of **BRIDGING THE GAP, an integrated Language, culture and Literature course**⁵, the most distinctive features of which are as follows.

4. The analysis that follows is culled from the above-mentioned article.

5. The course description outline is available in **El-Moubarriz**, *supra*.

Tough primarily intended to be a foundation course for the First Year students, it will certainly be used with some profit by Juniors and Sophomores as well, as a result of its catering for three levels ; (this we came to realize after pilot teaching with the First Years, the Second Years and the Third Years).

Indeed this book bridges the gap in more ways than one : between the Fresher in quest of enlightenment and the 'seasoned hand' in need of a 'brush up' ; between Language and Literature ; between the cultures and literatures of the English-speaking world and the student's own ; between the Secondary School and the University.

The general lay-out of the book, the texts selected and the supporting study material are intended to foster an integrated and gradual approach to literary studies.

We have arranged the texts according to what seemed to us their order of difficulty, i. e. from the most accessible to the most sophisticated in each of the four main genres (the novel, the short story, drama and poetry). Each of the four main parts thus constituted opens with an introduction to the genre and is followed by suggestions for further reading (for those students who, even at this early stage, wish to dig deeper into the specifics of each form of writing). The glossary of linguistic and literary terms at the end of the book will no doubt increase the student's critical repertory and her capacity to use it pertinently.

However this approach, based on linguistic accessibility, does not preclude one from adopting a thematic approach, thus moving at will across genre boundaries and examining the ways a particular theme is rendered under various formal guises.

The notes and exercises which follow each text are arranged in such a way as to facilitate the student's awareness of the content and the form and thus rationalize and organize, on evidence from the written page, her hitherto impressionistic and empirical responses.

The WORDS AND PHRASES section provides explanations for archaic expressions, especially difficult words, phrases, idioms and unfamiliar syntax, or simply invites the students to look up in her dictionary words and expressions which are essential for the understanding of the text.

The section entitled ABOUT THE AUTHOR, by allowing glimpses at the writer's life and work, will increase the student's motivation for reading.

The SKIMMING AND UNDERSTANDING section is designed to assess the student's comprehension of the text at a literal level before moving on to the stylistic study proper, where connotation and deviation are prized.

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT bridges the gap between the cultures in which the text is embedded and student's own ; furthermore, by relating text to context, it makes her more alert to the ironies, allusions, nuances contained in the text and thus prepares her to the stage that follows.

With SCANNING :STYLE AND EFFECT we come to the bedrock of literary appreciation. This is where the student lays the finger on the author's techniques and devices as they emerge from diction, grammar, syntax, rythm, tone and evaluates their effectiveness. The short composition which completes the section is made to test her capacity to 'absorb' the writer's style or comment upon it in a competent way.

she will be helped in this task by the section that comes next.

GETTING TO KNOW THE GENRE treats the extract under study as an example of the genre to which it belongs, delving into its technical aspects and metalanguage.

THE FURTHER READING section is designed to gently induce the student to read works on the same theme and thus enlarge her experience of the Art/Life interface and respond to the humanistic and universalist appeal of Literature.

The aim pursued is not to cram the student's heads with **knowledge**, but essentially to form their intellectual and critical faculties, to shape their minds in such a way as to equip them for the task of personnal fulfilment and nation building.

Let us not forget that it the human resources of a nation, rather than its material resources, that determine the pace of its economic and social development.

*. Paper presented at the AATE conference, Algiers, December 1993.