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READING LITERATURE AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSIONS IN THE EFL/EAL CLASSROOM IN NORWAY – A LOCAL CASE STUDY

Introduction

The background for this paper is first and foremost a questionnaire completed during the spring of 2010 by 66 practicing EFL/EAL teachers in Norwegian primary schools. My heartfelt interest is to uncover what happens in the EFL/EAL classroom concerning reading a literary text. Is reading literature considered a starting point for ethical and philosophical discussions, or is the focus primarily on the content? The questionnaires indicate that using comprehension questions in relation to text is the method that primarily dominates in Norwegian EFL/EAL classrooms, whereas methods that might open up for more philosophical approaches like role-play have a much lower score. Additionally other aesthetic approaches like making a drawing from the literary text seem to be neglected. The idea that literature can function as an open door into more complex ideas is my genuine belief, however; these ideas might not necessarily emerge from comprehension questions, which tend to focus on content rather than the philosophy of the text.

Another motivation for exploring how literature can open doors into more complex ideas, is my personal experience of 14 years of teaching literature in EFL/EAL classes in high school where this, to me, is the core essence of reading literature. When readers discover that literature is about the main philosophical, existential ideas and questions of life, such an experience will be a defining moment when it comes to reading literature. From my own teaching experience comprehension questions did not necessarily do the trick of disclosing the philosophical and existential ideas. The moment pupils experienced that “literature has not only made identity a theme; it has played a significant role in the construction of the identity of readers. The value of literature has long been linked to the vicarious experiences it gives readers, enabling them to know how it feels to be in particular situations and thus acquire dispositions to act and feel in certain ways” (Culler 1997: 115), the doors opened.

Observations in high schools A and B

With this frame of thought I set out to observe two classrooms in two different high schools in February 2011. The two schools were situated in the Oslo area, one

of which was located on the outskirts of Oslo (referred to as “school A”) whereas the other was located in the very centre of Oslo (referred to as “school B”). The two teachers, the pupils and the parents had been informed about the intentions for this pilot on beforehand. The teachers were to select a chapter or chapters from the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie as well as to develop their own activities in relation to this/these excerpts rather than have them prescribed by me. The reason for this was to try to observe an authentic literature workshop(s), which had not been influenced by my ideas. In School A I observed a 10th grade class as they worked with the first four chapters of the novel with the time-span of six English lessons. Additionally the pupils had to write a diary entry for one of the characters in these four chapters as their homework. In school B I observed an 11th grade class as they worked with the chapter “How to fight monsters” (chapter 8) during two English lessons conducted as a unit with a break. There was no homework given in relation to the work with this chapter for this group of pupils.

School A

During my first visit to school A I observed the class for 90 minutes. The pupils had already read chapter one the preceding week and the teacher started the session by asking a few comprehension questions from this chapter. Thereafter the class continued to read the novel. Since the school did not have a copy for each pupil to read individually, the teacher had scanned the chapters so that they read from a screen. Pupils were asked to read, but were not obliged to. The teacher read major parts since it was difficult for students to read from a screen. Moreover, she read with enthusiasm and different voices, which was appreciated by the pupils thus visualizing the text for them. Furthermore, in the beginning of the reading session the teacher took time to stop and ask questions to make sure pupils understood the content of these chapters. The novel included illustrations with vital information and great care was taken to let pupils analyze those during the reading session. As the reading progressed, the teacher read longer stretches not stopping as frequently as in the beginning of the session.

The next week the 90 minutes of English started with a short review of content from last weeks’ reading session. Then the class finished reading chapter four in much the same manner as described above. Subsequently the teacher asked the pupils to work in groups to “find adjectives” that described the characters: Junior, Rowdy, the parents, Mr. P. and the sister. All adjectives were shared in class and the teacher wrote these adjectives on the blackboard. Hereafter the teacher asked students to discuss the following questions in groups: 1) “And hey, in a weird way, being hungry makes food taste better” (p. 8) What does this statement say about Junior?; 2) According to Junior what is the worst thing about being poor?; 3) What does the title of chapter three “Revenge is my middle name” refer to? After these questions were discussed the pupils were to choose one character, one setting or one situation that they were to either role-play or present to the other pupils in class. They were given approximately 20 minutes for preparation before all groups presented their work in class.

My third and last visit to this 10th grade was when they did their final work on the novel in English. This session was focused on preparation work for the diaries the pupils were to write. The teacher reminded the pupils of the genre-criteria in relation to writing diaries. Additionally she had quite a few questions to help the pupils get started on their written work. The questions were not comprehension questions, but rather open questions where answers were not necessarily found in the novel itself enhancing an aesthetic response to the literary text, which again may presuppose aesthetic reading. Pupils worked in groups divided according to which character they planned to write a diary for. The teacher made it clear that this session was “just for inspiration” and stressed that they were not required to include everything from this workshop in their diaries.

School A – analyzing classroom discourse on 2nd visit

When the teacher asked the first question: “And hey, in a weird way, being hungry makes food taste better” (p. 8) What does this statement say about Junior? One pupil responded “even if they are poor they are happy when they have food.” Another student pointed out that Junior appreciates food more when he gets food seldom. The second question the teacher posed: “What is the worst thing about being poor?” was given the answer: “being hungry.” Upon reading the novel Junior explains, that the worst thing about being poor, is not being hungry but being unable to take your sick dog to the vet. Later in this sequence one group of pupils chose to role-play the scene when Junior realizes his dog is very sick and the father has to shoot the dog since they have no money for the vet. One could assume that the question about being poor provided by the teacher spurred the pupils’ understanding of this life condition and the pain of this situation. In their role-play a lot of emotions and empathy was played out. The dog was given the ability to speak and he begged for his life arguing that he was a living creature. Is being poor a philosophical or existential question? This might not be the case. But what was interesting here, was of course the pupils’ interpretation of the scene underscoring the pain of a life-situation like this by giving the dog the voice, so that he can speak and try to save himself. In essence this scene was about life and death – and about being unable to save a pet’s life due to poverty. By personifying the dog and by giving him the ability to speak, there might be an indication of the pupils’ realization of the dog as the “Other” according to Levinas’ philosophy. One might suggest that in this role-play the dog took on the face of the “Other” and pupils related to the pain and suffering the dog was experiencing. Furthermore, it can be argued that by realizing Junior’s pain when having to part with his closest friend, the suffering of the “Other” was embedded in the play and the pupils made the pain their own.

Was it the role-play in itself that brought about a deeper understanding of the literary text? By being given the opportunity to use an aesthetic approach, a new text emerged. A possible understanding of this role-play might be that the role-play was an extension of the novel corresponding to what Wolfgang Iser refers to as a “virtual text” being created taking on a life on its own:

From this we may conclude that the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the

realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. (Iser 1978: 21)

The role-play is a new oral text with elements from the novel as well as elements from the pupils' reading and interpretation of the novel. When interviewing the pupils about this role-play and about why they had chosen to personify the dog, I was surprised at first. The pupils answered that the main reason for giving the dog lines to speak, was that they felt all members of the group should be given the opportunity to speak English. Despite this fact, a virtual text was created because of this coincidence or maybe this would have happened no matter what?

In the interview I also asked them why they had chosen this particular scene and the pupils said that they felt this scene was well written and that they really liked it. Moreover, one pupil pointed out that "Junior loved his dog so much" as an additional reason for choosing this scene. They all had pets themselves and could easily understand Junior. So this might be the core reason why this group of pupils appeared to have understood the text at a deeper level – that this scene struck a cord in them relating the text to their own lives. According to Iser "[...] instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along inside that, which it has to apprehend" (Iser 1978: 109). Such a reading of a literary text might "create realities [...] in which words invite us to create «realities» in the world to correspond to them" (Bruner 1986: 64). Consequently, in order to understand literary texts with a philosophical, existential view, aesthetic reading and response seemed to be the premise – the text must relate to my own life in one way or another.

School B

During my visit to school B I observed an 11th grade class for 90 minutes as the pupils worked with chapter 8 of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Starting the work with this chapter students were divided into six groups by the teacher. Each group got one segment of the chapter of which they were to make tableaux. The groups set about their work by reading the extract given to them. No other pre-task was given. Pupils then planned their tableaux discussing amongst themselves how to complete this task. All groups showed their tableaux to the other students. As the pupils presented their tableaux, they felt a need to explain what their picture envisioned. Afterwards the teacher gathered the class in a large circle in the classroom and pupils took turns reading the complete chapter. No one was forced to read aloud. The teacher did not ask questions as the reading progressed, but waited to the very end before posing questions. The teacher asked open questions that often lead to an engaging conversation.

Teacher: What do you think of this name?

Pupil 1: Junior is more common in the Rez.

Pupil 2: Isn't junior meaning "small" for the white people? Like we would say "kom da småen" (means: "come on little one").

- Teacher: Yes – that’s right. Junior is another way of saying that you are small.
- Pupil 3: Junior is one person at the Rez and one at school.
- Pupil 4: He is named after his father.
- Teacher: He feels like he is two people in one body. Do you ever feel like this?
- Pupil 7: I live outside Oslo in NN where there are a lot of farmers. I was with friends and I started to talk “breiere” (means: using local accent), but when I came here and I speak “finere” (means: using the accent of the western part of Oslo, but student phrases it as speaking in a finer manner).
- Pupil 8: Snakker du finere her? (means: Do you speak in a finer manner here?)
- Pupil 7: Yes, I feel this is not as big difference as it is for Junior, but I do have this feeling.
- Teacher: How is he (Junior) different from the other kids?
- Pupil 9: He’s Indian.
- Pupil 10: Geek.
- Pupil 11: Poor.
- Pupil 12: He talks differently.
- ...
- Teacher: I tried to explain Arnold as an either-nor person. What do you think?
- Pupil 7: He tries being Indian and white and ends up being none of them – mixes up the roles.
- Teacher: Mixed up the roles?
- Pupil 7: Yeah.
- Teacher: “Betray his tribe”. Why do you think he (Junior) says this?
- Pupil 13: Left them.
- Pupil 14: Left and wanted to get an education.
- Teacher: Does the tribe feel the same way?
- Pupil 15: I think they are proud of him.
- Pupil 16: His father is proud of him.
- Pupil 17: Yes, but his father is a drunk.
- ...

After the classroom talk about the chapter students were given the task to make a front page of a newspaper where the “top stories” from chapter eight should be given a headline. Students then presented their newspapers.

School B – analyzing classroom discourse

In the first place when observing the classroom conversation in class B it is noticeable that students were engaged in the discussion. The most distinguishable part of the classroom talk was Pupil 7’s numerous interactions with the text. Not belonging, or living between cultures were themes that this student clearly related to. The existential question of identity – “Who am I?” emerged from this conversation. Subsequently when readers relate the text to their own life, important questions and unmarked insight might arise. A totally new world might discharge from such insight corresponding to what Iser writes: “Instead of finding out whether the text gives an accurate or inaccurate description of the object, he has to build up the object for himself – often in a manner running to the familiar world evoked by the text” (Iser 1978: 109) Correspondingly three of the six front pages of the fictive newspapers

had titles related to the theme of identity: “Indian Boy at White School,” “Reardan High School First Native American,” and “First Native American Ever Attending Reardan High” indicating that other pupils had deciphered this idea as well. Furthermore the subject of alcoholism was present in four of the six newspapers. The classroom conversation transcribed above continued into a conversation about alcoholism among Native Americans. It should be noted that this topic was the last to be discussed before pupils started out with their written work.

Comparisons and concluding remarks

Chinn, Anderson and Waggoner claim: “To construct new concepts and acquire new ways of thinking, students need a chance to express their ideas and hear others’ ideas. But research suggests that discussion often fail to achieve these goals. During a typical discussion, teachers dominate the talking and tightly regulate the content of the discussion” (Chinn, Anderson, Waggoner 2001: 378). When I compared the classroom talk or discussion in these two classrooms of my observation, it was rather obvious that in School A the talk was led by the teacher and in most instances the questions posed were primarily about content. Consequently the classroom discourse on these occasions did not lead to further exploration of philosophical ideas or existential grapples. What is more, the comprehension questions often led the teacher into dishing out the answers and her own understanding of the text. In contrast the classroom talk was as much directed by the pupils as by the teacher in school B. In particular this can be observed when the theme of alcoholism was initiated by a pupil. One might also suggest that the themes of “living between cultures” and “identity” were spurred by a pupil when Pupil 3 said: “Junior is one person at the Rez and one at school.” However, when the teacher at school A catered for a discourse approach that opened up for an aesthetic stance, students were enabled to express their ideas and insights using role-plays and presentations. When the discourse took on an experience–text relationship and a collaborative reasoning, students and teacher shared the control of the topic as clearly visualized in the dialogue from school B.

To conclude, I must say that the limitations of my project are quite clear; I have only observed two classes during a limited timeframe. Despite this limitation, I do believe that some interesting observations were completed and suggest that further classroom observation and research in relation to how reading literature might enforce an awareness of the philosophical ideas encompassed in such texts, should be encouraged. In this project I set out to investigate if pupils were able to distill philosophical ideas in excerpts from Sherman Alexie’s novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. My initial thought was that Levinas’ philosophy of the “Other” would emerge clearly as the pupils worked with this novel. Nevertheless, at first sight one might hold that these ideas did not truly materialize. On the other hand I do feel that traces of Levinas’ philosophy as well as other existential issues were seen in the role-play in school A, however; an essential question to be raised is – did the pupils at all realize these ideas themselves? From the interview it seemed rather clear, that to them it was not a conscious revelation. But then again, maybe from a subtle understanding a deeper knowledge will surface? Similar experiences were seen in school B during the classroom talk where Pupil 7 said he felt like Junior.

One might presume that the pupil saw Junior as the “Other” in this instance and that a notion of Levinas’ ideas was felt. Furthermore, in my observation there seemed to be an obvious link between pupils’ possibilities of grasping such truths and the methods used in relation to the literature in question. Open questions and role-play appeared to cater for an aesthetic response and a possibility for pupils to connect the literature they read to their own lives. A text-to-self connection appeared to be crucial for a deeper understanding. In such instances of text-to-self revelations a new door opened into the worlds of the pupils own minds as well as into the world of ideas. The novel and its characters became the “Other” enabling the reader to face the “Other” in the real world.

The challenge to self is precisely reception of the absolutely other. The epiphany of the absolute other is face where the Other hails me and signifies to me, by its nakedness, by its destitution, an order. (Levinas 2003: 33)

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Czytanie literatury jako punkt wyjścia do dyskusji filozoficznych na lekcjach angielskiego w Norwegii – badanie lokalne

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest oparty na kwestionariuszu wypełnionym w roku 2010 przez 66 nauczycieli języka angielskiego pracujących w norweskich szkołach. Celem było otrzymanie informacji na temat wykorzystania literatury w czasie lekcji języka angielskiego. Czy literatura jest punktem wyjścia do etycznej i filozoficznej dyskusji, czy też nacisk jest położony na samo rozumienie treści tekstu?

Kwestionariusze wskazują na dominację pytań o rozumienie tekstu wśród używanych technik nauczania. Mocno wierzę, że literatura może otwierać drzwi do bardziej skomplikowanych idei, ale te idee nie wynikną z pytań o rozumienie tekstu, które kładą nacisk na treść, a nie na filozofię tekstu.

W przyszłości planuję przeprowadzić obserwację, jak uczniowie radzą sobie z powieścią 'The Diary of a Part-Time Indian' autorstwa Shermana Alexie. Czy ten tekst otworzy drzwi do filozoficznych pytań? Jak praca z powieścią wpłynie na dyskurs w czasie lekcji języka angielskiego? Jak techniki nauczania wpływają na głębokie rozumienie tekstu literackiego? A także – jak uczniowie odbierają pracę z tekstem literackim na lekcji języka angielskiego?