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Different Interpretations of Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' by EFL Students

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Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate the EFL students' potential for having their own attitudes when interpreting Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, 'My Last Duchess', through the analysis of the poem and supporting their attitudes with evidence from the poem. After the researcher/teacher had read the poem to the undergraduate EFL students and explained its form and language in a neutral voice open to different interpretations, students were asked to write their interpretations of the poem from their own perspectives quoting the words/lines of the poem that support their attitudes as evidence. The findings showed that students' interpretations had four perspectives: (1) the Duke is a man deeply in love, maddened and blinded by jealousy, (2) the Duchess is an inconsiderate wife, (3) the Duke is a possessive and dominating husband, and (4) the Duchess is a woman who does not meet the expectations of her position (as a Duchess). The analysis revealed that EFL students had the potential for developing capacities and skills of critical reading of literature but they need more practice and time.

Keywords: Critical reading, EFL teaching, attitude, perspective, dramatic monologue, Browning

1. Introduction

'My Last Duchess' is a dramatic monologue by Robert Browning (1812-1889) first appeared in 1842 in Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics*. The poem is written in 28 rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter. The poem tells the story of the Duchess which is based on Browning's reading on the figure of the fifth Duke of Ferrara, a cold Renaissance Italian aristocrat of the sixteenth century, who was rumoured to have poisoned his wife. The voice of the speaker in 'My Last Duchess', the Duke, however is less 16th-century Italian than 19th-century Victorian. The Duke of Ferrara narrates the story of the last Duchess to the envoy of the Count whose daughter he is soon to marry. At the poem's opening, the Duke has just pulled back a curtain to reveal to the envoy a portrait of his previous Duchess which was painted by Fra Pandolf. The last Duchess's deep, passionate glance and attractive beautiful smile, according to the Duke, were not reserved solely for him as she devoted as much attention to other things and people and was not sufficiently impressed with his aristocratic superiority. He chose not to stoop and tell her about the rudeness and inappropriateness of her conduct but made commands to stop her smiles forever. The Duke then brings up the subject of dowry insisting that his real interest is in the Count's daughter before asking the envoy to go downstairs to meet with others.

What can be inferred from the Duke's story centers on "Why is the Duke telling the ambassador of his future father-in-law the story of the last Duchess in the very act of arranging his next marriage?" (Beatty and Matchett 1965, pp. 87-8) The Duke's motive in telling the story of the last Duchess can be conjectured on the details of the poem. Inferencing plays an important role in the process of interpreting the poem by which the reader gets at the meaning of the poem and forms an attitude. In EFL teaching of Poetry, limiting undergraduate students' responses to the poem to the teacher's interpretation of the poem does not allow the students to develop the skills and capacities of having their own perspectives and attitudes. 'Perspective', in this paper, means the way of approaching and considering ideas, characters, and events in the poem when interpreting it. 'Attitude' means the opinion or point of view that the student forms in her/his interpretation of the poem based on evidence (words, phrases or sentences) from the poem. When the students are inferencing, interpreting, taking perspectives and forming attitudes, they are attempting critical reading of the poem. Developing students' critical reading of literature in particular develops their capacities for critical thinking in general in the long term.

This study aimed to investigate undergraduate EFL students' ability to consciously form their own attitudes in their interpretations of the poem, justify one's attitude and support it with clues from the poem. For the purpose of this study, the researcher/teacher had read the poem to the EFL students and explained its form and language in a neutral voice open to different interpretations, then she asked the students to write their own interpretations of the poem. Students' different interpretations of the poem are given below preceded by a brief note on the condition and importance of teaching critical reading of literature to EFL students and the method applied in this study, and followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

2. Teaching Critical Reading of Literature to EFL Students

Critical reading of literature requires students to construct meanings of the text through understanding the implied meanings and detecting inferential relationships from the details of the text in order to make fair-grounded judgments and attitudes. When students exercise analysis, inference, argumentation and interpretation they are developing some capacities for critical thinking. Lazere (1987) emphasizes the role of critical reading of literature in critical thinking as it develops the capacities:

- to unify and make connections in one's experience; to follow an extended line of thought through propositional, thematic, or symbolic development; to engage in mature moral reasoning and to form judgments of quality and taste; to be attuned to skepticism and irony; and to be perceptive of ambiguity, relativity of viewpoint, and multiple dimensions of form and meaning (literal and figurative language syntactic and structural complexity, etc. (p. 3)

Tung's and Chang's (2009) study on developing Taiwanese undergraduates' critical thinking through literature reading reveals that the learning environment of the EFL learners did not habituate them to be proficient in critical thinking, a problem that the undergraduate EFL students in University of Aden similarly face, as their learning habits and experiences were mostly reproduction-oriented and they were not given enough chances to question, explain or evaluate the knowledge instructed in the classroom. EFL students' insufficient language proficiency and cultural differences also discourage critical reading of literature in EFL teaching and learning. The critical reading of literature demands students to go beyond the literal interpretation of what they read and read between the lines, analyze, and form judgments, to interact with the text in terms of their own knowledge and experience. Heble (2006) taught 'My Last Duchess' to her Omani students and described their reactions. She noticed that some interpretations were based on an Arabic understanding of the relationship between men and women and what was permissible and what was not. However, she was aware enough not to discourage her students personal interpretations or impose her own world-view on them. Her concern about "How was one to draw distinction between an appreciation of the poem as a work of art and a subjective response to its content?" (p. 5) is crucially important in critical reading of poetry in EFL teaching and learning.

Inferencing in poetry, as a capacity of critical reading, requires students to get much of what they understand of the poem indirectly to reach a conclusion based on specific evidence from the poem and construct meaning by what they take the words and sentences to mean. When critically reading a poem, the EFL students draw on their knowledge of the language and of conventions of social communication to infer the unstated meaning of the poem. Their recognizing of implications and drawing of conclusions will be based on their own experiences and values. However, when they use textual evidence to prove their interpretations, they will come to know in discussion that there is no one right answer and that the same evidence opens up the text to different interpretations by others.

3. Research Method

The teacher met the students, a group of forty-two students (eleven males and thirty-one females), three hours per week for the 'Poetry' course as designed by the courses plan of the Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Aden, two hours in one day and one hour in another day in the same week. In the two hours' class, the teacher read the selected poem, 'My Last Duchess', to the students and explained its form and language in a neutral voice that revealed no particular perspective. As a homework assignment, the students were asked to read the poem several times trying to find an answer to the question "Why is the Duke telling the ambassador of his future father-in-law the story of the last Duchess in the very act of arranging his next marriage?" Afterwards, they were to write their answers for these two questions: '(1) Write your interpretation of the poem supporting your attitude with evidence from the poem. (2) What is the significance of the art objects that are mentioned in the poem?' In the one-hour class, students submitted their written works and a whole group discussion was held in which students presented and discussed their interpretations and attitudes.

4. Findings

Students' written answers were classified according to the perspective and attitude each student took in his/her interpretation of the poem. Some students' writings were just one paragraph of two sentences and some others' were in two pages. Students' writings of the same perspective were amalgamated into one coherent piece of writing. After correcting the language, this amalgamated piece of writing is presented in this paper as students' 'interpretation' as given below. Students' interpretations were found to have four perspectives. The first interpretation is an amalgamation of the writings of two male students, the second is of five male and female students, the third is of three female students, and the fourth interpretation is an amalgamation of the writings of two female students. The rest of the writings were excluded as they were mere reproductions of the teacher's explanation of the poem showing no perspective and attitude or being meaningless. The students' interpretations are as follows:

4.1. The First Interpretation: A Man Deeply in Love, Maddened and Blinded by Jealousy

The character of the Duke in the dramatic monologue, 'My Last Duchess, is that of a man who was deeply in love with his beautiful wife. Jealousy is his flaw like Shakespeare's Othello. He couldn't bear to see his wife thank and smile to other men (lines 14-15 and 27-28) or be admired by them (16-21). Maddened and blinded by jealousy and suspicion he killed her. In his monologue with the envoy, his audience, he speaks his mind and reveals himself. His justification for killing the Duchess implies his unconscious regret for killing her. His words convey that he misses "the depth and passion of her earnest glance", "the spot of joy on her cheek", and his "favour at her breast".

The bronze statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse made by the sculptor, Claus of Innsbruck, and the painting of the last Duchess drawn by Fra Pandolf tell about the Duke's love for and appreciation of art and beauty.

4.2. *The Second Interpretation: An Inconsiderate Wife*

Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' highlights good qualities that a woman should have such as sincerity, modesty, good manners, and shy reserve. The lack of those qualities may cause disturbance in marital relationships between men and women. The Duchess in Browning's poem neglected the demands of her husband. She treated men in a manner that irritated her husband and felt happy when other men admired her and praised her beauty paying no attention to her husband's feelings (lines 13-21 and 31-34). Disrespecting the Duke's rank and desires caused him to kill her. Divorce would have been a better solution than murder. Perhaps Christian people of that time were not allowed to divorce their wives or may be because the husband was a Duke he was not allowed to divorce the Duchess. When the Duke was to remarry, he told the ambassador of the father of the next Duchess all those behaviour that he disliked and wanted his wife not to do.

Wealthy people, like the Duke, valued sculpting and painting. No wonder then that the Duke had paintings, (one of them was that of the last Duchess) and sculptures (like the bronze sea-horse) in his palace.

4.3. *The Third Interpretation: A Dominating and Possessive Husband*

The Duke in Browning's poem is a dominating man who wants to control every detail in his wife's life: what she likes, what she says, how she feels and how she reacts to people. His craze for domination is inseparable from his desire for possessiveness. The Duchess's innocence and naivety were interpreted by the Duke as inappropriateness and rudeness (lines 15-34). It hurt him to see her smile to other people the same way she smiled to him: "but who passed without/ Much the same smile?" Proud and arrogant as he was, he wouldn't stoop to speak to her about it (lines 35-43). As he could not control her, he murdered her and possessed her smile in a painting. The Duke told the story of the last Duchess to the ambassador of the Count whom he was going to marry his daughter so that the new Duchess be lessened and do not behave like the last Duchess.

The Duke was happy to own the Duchess with her beautiful smile as an art object, a painting on the wall, the same way he owned the bronze statue of Neptune taming the seahorse.

4.4. *The Fourth Interpretation: A Woman Who Did Not Meet the Expectations of Her Position*

In Robert Browning's poem, 'My Last Duchess', the Duchess did not value her rank and did not meet the requirements, demands, and moral and social expectations of her position as a 'Duchess'. She did not understand that she was obliged to behave in a certain manner dictated by her position which advantaged her with kind of social power and authority that required seriousness and self-control; qualities that she lacked in her personality (lines 21-24). She could have been kind and friendly with people but in a reserved way (lines 27-31). Besides, she fueled the Duke's jealousy and aroused his suspicion over petty actions (lines 15-21 and 31-34). The Duke, as a man of power and authority, decided that that woman with such immature personality should no more hold the position of a Duchess. As divorce was not an easily available solution in such Christian aristocratic milieu to get rid of that woman, the Duke might have killed her. The Duke afterwards planned for another political arranged marriage. The new Duchess should know the requirements of her position. What the Duke said to the envoy of the Count was much like a job description of what a woman who holds the position of a Duchess should not do.

Decorating the houses with valuable paintings and sculptures were very usual of rich people of that time. The last Duchess defined herself and took her place: a beautiful smiling woman painted on the wall.

5. Discussion

Student's answers to the question: "Why is the Duke telling the ambassador of his future father-in-law the story of the last Duchess in the very act of arranging his next marriage?" helped them to take perspectives in reading the poem. Their answers were based on what each valued in the poem; i.e. those aspects that each student focused on, which motivated him/her to read between the lines to make inferences. The reasons for the differences in the students' responses can be attributed to their: (1) knowledge of text conventions, (2) modes of experience, (3) psychological perspective, (4) social context, and (5) cultural identities. (Beach 1993, p. 14)

The first interpretation revealed the students' interest in the textual conventions of the dramatic monologue. It focused on the aspects of drama in the poem: character, audience, and monologue. The students' dramatic perspective of the character of Browning's Duke made them recall Shakespeare's Othello. They perceived the Duke much as a character than a speaker. Those students seemed to have perceived "the concentrated essence of a complete tragedy [which] is evoked by this short poem" (Thomas 1979, p. 69). Concentrating on the psychological aspect in the Duke's character, they emphasized his personal motives, needs, and internal desires. This perspective cannot avoid being influenced by the assumptions and presuppositions of the readers' own socio-psychological world. According to Petch (2008), the process of interpretive reading of a dramatic monologue creates meaning, as well as evoking it:

- The dramatic monologue is a notoriously open and question-begging form, and all readers are tempted to fill the gaps by supplying (or imagining) situations, motives, pressures, and needs, for the utterance which constitutes the poem. Such an act of interpretation involves positing a set of circumstances within which a character can be seen to function, these circumstances explaining the poem. (pp. 34-5)

As Arab culture appreciates loyalty and modesty, the second interpretation seemed to reflect the students' own values and definitions of gender roles which were in harmony with the Duke's requirements of his wife. The students were concerned with moral values in the poem. The cultural identities of the students influenced the students' interpretation of the poem and shaped their attitude of and judgment on the Duchess.

The third interpretation however rejected the traditional gender hierarchy in which the husband holds the superior position over his wife and requires her to be entirely subservient to his will. This interpretation reflected how the poem was relevant to the students' experiential mode. They seemed to empathize and identify with the Duchess making connections between the poem and their own lives and experiences.

The feminist resentment of the third interpretation interestingly did not exist in the fourth interpretation which rejected the stereotyped image of the victimized woman and held the Duchess responsible for her sad end. The students of the fourth interpretation sounded free of gender oppression and repression and believed in the inner power of women, female wisdom and self control. In their perspective, women in positions of power, like the Duchess, should meet the expectations of their positions and can share power with men. This interpretation revealed the students' interest in women's empowerment and their anticipation of how social roles, relationships, motives, needs and conventions can operate in particular contexts of gender empowerment.

6. Conclusion

Some EFL students were able to make their own interpretations and form and express their own perspectives and attitudes with a narrative poem like Browning's dramatic monologue. The teacher also was able to explain the form and language of the poem to the students in a neutral voice open to different interpretations. But other poems with complicated forms and/or ideas may not be possible to be treated in such a way. In the discussion, students' sense that their ideas, analysis, interpretations and attitudes were well accepted and valued motivated them to pronounce their interest to attempt other challenging poems. It is worth mentioning that the students, in the discussion, expressed their understanding that the Duke had murdered his wife because divorce was not a solution easily available to him in the Christian and aristocratic environment of that time. Interestingly, they considered it a cultural difference of which they were aware. Placing the Duke in his historical and cultural context (which is different from their own context) before making judgments on him, as it shows that the students were exercising "contextualizing", an important strategy of critical reading (Sousa 2004, pp. 105-6), it also reveals that they were enough aware not to make emotional subjective attitudes but objective attitudes based on facts from the poem.

The interpretations that were included in this study were nearly one third of the total number of students' attempts. This result shows that EFL students have the potential for developing capacities of critical reading of literature. It may also indicate that those students who could take perspectives and attitudes had a tendency towards literary criticism. It might be fair to conclude that other students whose interpretations were excluded also have the potential for critical reading and critical thinking and can develop their capacities and skills with more practice in a long time.

7. References

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