LITERARY AWARENESS: CONNECTING BRAZIL AND UKRAINE

Zyngier S.

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

Chesnokova A.V.

Kyiv National Linguistic University

Viana V.

Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro

The article focuses on the major theoretical and practical results of developing the concept of Literary Awareness (henceforth LitAw) in two countries, namely, Brazil and Ukraine. Introduced by S. Zyngier in 1994 as a methodology by means of which readers become sensitized to the verbal artistry of imaginative texts and their role in human life, LitAw enjoyed over ten years of successful applications in Brazil. Since 2005, it has been used in Ukrainian institutions and has triggered several research projects by undergraduate, graduate and post-doctoral students.

Higher education has never been free from drawbacks, and the situation today is no exception. One of the major problems of modern universities in a large number of different countries is the lack of students' ability to successfully interpret different kinds of literary texts. As regards the study of literature in one's mother tongue, M. Short, B. Busse et al. [2007: 106] state that "by and large, native-speaking students of English literature love reading and talking about literature, but are less keen to study the language of literary texts in the systematic, analytical and precise detail that stylistics requires." The problem is aggravated when it comes to making sense out of literature in a foreign language. According to S. Zyngier, O. Fialho et al. [2007: 194], "many Humanities students go through university acquiring a rather transient knowledge about literature. They rely on a pool of dates and facts for their tests which they mostly forget after the exams." Similarly, P. Stockwell [2007] argues that the teaching of literature in different parts of the world nowadays follows a historical, sociological, philosophical or archaeological perspective. In his opinion, it is stylistics that can offer students the opportunity of studying literature *per se*.

International surveys such as PISA [INEP 2001] have shown that students present difficulty in developing autonomy in reading and evaluating texts. M. Rodriguez [2001] argues that the Brazilian undergraduates she observed held the view that the most important aspect in literature was to

understand what was meant by the author. It seems that, at least to these students, no other aspect was involved in literary art. As a consequence, their level of sensitivity towards creative writing was fairly low. In addition, students seem to have a pragmatic approach to the study of literature. For example, the Brazilian undergraduates who took part in F.F. Coutinho's [2001] research argued that the reason they studied literature in English was in fact to learn the language. This is why there is a need of a methodology which can readdress the issue of literature in the classroom

One such proposal is Literary Awareness [Zyngier 1994] – a theoretically-grounded methodology which draws much from Hallidayan functional linguistics [Halliday 1985], the critical pedagogy developed by P. Freire [1972] and reader-response approaches to teaching literature, initially proposed by L. Rosenblatt [1938]. The linguistic perspective of the method sees language in context and the way it works to produce effects on readers. When the context in consideration is the classroom, it is understood that the strategies developed should be learner focused and that the teacher is but a mediator of the process of learning.

LitAw aims at sensitizing students to verbal art by having them respond to a number of stylistic patterns in different text types. "Literary" is here understood as relating to imaginative texts, that is, it is not restricted to what is generally classified as "canonical". As S. Zyngier, O. Fialho et al. [2007: 195] explain, "grafted onto developments in language awareness, LitAw depends on activities which promote students' sensitivity to the verbal aesthetic experience. The main objective is to determine how interpretation is processed and justified so as to decide which kind of interpretation is developed. It is assumed that once students are able to find stylistic patterns in texts, describe them accurately, and evaluate them with reference to their literary repertoire, they will be able to apply the same strategies to other texts autonomously."

Instead of seeing literary texts as archaeological sites where meaning and information are extracted, LitAw assumes that reading a literary text is an experiential interactive process based on reception and production. S. Zyngier [1994: 5] states that when writing a text, the author aims at approaching the reader's feelings by means of certain effects the language of text allows. The author adds that "as the reaction occurs, the reader may also be conscious of the clues provided by the text and is thus able to evaluate the writer's craft" [Zyngier 1994: 5]. This leads us to think that, when dealing with literary studies, what becomes central is the reader, and not the text itself. In this sense, literature is basically a personal experience, and not just the acquisition of facts about literature, such as biographical data or social conditions.

As an interactive process, LitAw assumes that participants have to act in order to enjoy the literary experience. To this purpose, students and teachers play different roles, which differ from those in a traditional classroom. In many situations around the world, the old tradition that it is the teacher

who controls knowledge still persists. In this view, it would be up to this teacher to fill students' empty minds with information. P. Freire [1972] postulated that students are the actual knowledge-builders and teachers are mediators who are there to meet students' needs. Thus, LitAw sees students as agents in the literary system, and the teachers' role is to guide them throughout their journey of self-discovery, experience and knowledge.

In Brazil, the programme of LitAw [Zyngier 2002] has been already in use for over a decade now.[*] S. Zyngier [2002: 5] warns us that it "is not a prescription providing universal solutions. It tries, instead, to offer methodological suggestions and orientations." The programme consists of 12 units covering several topics such as literariness, transitivity and personification, suspension by subordination, vagueness by modality, repetition and lexical choice, iconicity, neologism, time/tense contrast, point of view and speech presentation, comparison, register mismatch and mediation.

Each unit follows a similar four-step pattern. First, students are introduced to a text containing the pattern to be studied so that they can reflect on it. Second, learners are encouraged to come to the conclusion of how the pattern is used on their own before they are presented with some guidelines on its usage. Third, some analytical work is carried out with other texts so that the theory is seen from a practical perspective. Finally, students create their own piece of writing, making use of the given pattern. At this stage, they are also expected to produce what is called the "process of creation", that is, a few paragraphs explaining their creation and its expected effects on readers.

From a practical perspective, the guidelines described above may be illustrated by means of the LitAw work on time/tense contrast [Zyngier 2002: 50-54]. The first exercise in this unit is based on the poem "Mad Ad" by R. McGough. After reading it, participants are asked, among other tasks, to group the verbs in terms of time reference, to decide whether they have the same time and to reflect on the effect of verb use in the poem. Class work only moves to a second stage when participants are done with the exercise and the subsequent group discussion. At this moment, participants are offered some "food for thought" on the use of verbs, point/contrast in time and changes in tense. Then, it is time for participants to apply the theory they have worked with to the analysis of a different poem they have not seen before. They are asked to consider time incompatibility, time shift and verb tenses so as to relate them to the meaning conveyed by the poem. At the end of the unit, participants are asked to come up with a situation which has two time references and states of mind. After listing the different stages of the situation, they are encouraged to arrange what has been written in a poem. It is also expected that participants write their processes of creation in this last stage, considering the verb tenses used, the contrast created and the contribution of the latter to the poem itself.

For instance, while working on the unit described above, a student has produced the following poem [Zyngier 2002: 52]:

> *Parents & sons*
>
> *They had the Beatles*
>
> *We have Britney*
>
> *They loved TVs*
>
> *We love PCs*
>
> *They had to obey*
>
> *We have the way*
>
> *They wanted freedom*
>
> *We want a kingdom*
>
> *They were careless*
>
> *We are fearless*

In the process of creation, this learner explained the idea underpinning the creative writing produced [Zyngier 2002: 52]: "*At first, I chose the tenses that I was supposed to work with, that were present and past. Afterwards I thought about a situation that changed, but everything has changed so I decide[d] to compare how things were in our parents' youth to our youth.*

In this poem I want[ed] to create a feeling of sadness about the present generation, comparing exaggeratedly all the good things that our parents had in the past with the things that we have today. For example, in music, when I say they had the Beatles and we have Britney, I'm not saying that the artists today do [sic] not worth a penny, I just want[ed] to say that they had "natural music", and we have electronic music. I don't know if in this poem, it is good to explain what I am trying to say. It is up to the reader [to] get [to] his/her own conclusion."

It can be noticed that not only has the student understood the specific stylistic pattern, but has also been able to apply it in order to create the poem "Parents & sons." In the process of creation, this relationship between theory and application has been made clear.

Research on the effects of LitAw showed that students became more sensitized to literature although the increase in awareness was not steady and the same for all the units in the programme [Zyngier, Fialho et al. 2007]. In addition, the participants were able to write their own pieces of prose and/or poetry as has been demonstrated above. It should also be stressed that these students were in a position to produce creative writing in an autonomous way even though they had an upper-intermediate command of English. The volume entitled *Words in Action* [1998] is standing evidence of such achievement. As C.A.K. Tannus [1998: 9] writes in the opening of the volume, "it is gratifying to see the originality and creativity of the poems selected as well as the richness of their content and form."

Although C.A.K. Tannus [1998] also foresaw that this approach to literature was to be expanded to other contexts, only recently has it reached another country, namely, Ukraine. This joint activity has been developed under the auspices of REDES (Research and Development in Empirical Studies), an international research group which has national centres in Brazil, Canada, Germany and Ukraine. REDES fosters cross-cultural studies involving the four national centres [Viana, Fialho et al. 2007]. This joint Brazilian and Ukrainian project** on LitAw is an example of how the group exchanges educational and research practices. In order to make it possible for REDES members to communicate with one another, the group maintains an online platform and discussion forum in which one can find more information about its activities (www.redes.lmu.de) and in which the cooperation for this project started. As an outcome of this joint effort, two Ukrainian universities – namely, Kyiv National Linguistic University (KNLU) and Horlivka State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages (HSPIFL) – have adopted the LitAw programme.

The way the programme is structured gives ample opportunities for students and teachers to incorporate it into already existing courses (for example, Lexicology or Stylistics of the English Language) or run it as a separate or optional one. In Brazil, the programme was run as part of the third-term course of English language to undergraduates majoring in Portuguese and English.*** In Ukraine, it was successfully taught first as an integral part of the Practical English course and later as an independent optional course. This academic year the practice continues with a group of 32 highly motivated students of the fourth year of the Translators' Department at KNLU. The option of having LitAw workshops on their own has been more attractive in Ukraine as it makes the course unified and coherent, thus enabling the participants to fully develop their independent interpretational skills.

Being the first time LitAw awareness is carried out outside Brazilian soil, the reports written by Ukrainian teachers/researchers suggest that they consider the teaching experience rewarding and their own students have become highly motivated [The Catchers in the Rhyme 2006]. Ukrainian learners have also been sensitized to stylistic patterns and have been able to create their own poems as can be seen in the following example in which an ode is written to a planner [The Catchers in the Rhyme 2006: 94-95]:

> *To my planner*
>
> *O planner, my planner!*
> *As days go by*
> *The pleasure of using you*
> *I cannot deny.*
> *O planner, sweet planner!*
> *My friend of dark days,*

My helper, my saver,

My joy in all ways!

In addition to its pedagogical application, the invaluable benefit of this methodology is that it brings up multiple research perspectives – equally for students and teachers. One of them is working out the Poetic Awareness theory, which can potentially explain why, as it was revealed by a series of experiments conducted at KNLU and beyond, readers' understanding of poetry written in a language different from one's native often fails, and the level of sensitivity to the verbal artistry of a foreign author sometimes remains unsatisfactory [Chesnokova 2007]. This may cast light on the reasons of this misunderstanding as well as the possible ways of overcoming the difficulty in poetry appreciation.

Undergraduate and graduate independent research in developing LitAw is important as well. At least two M.A. students from KNLU have selected aspects of LitAw as their study spheres. Smaller projects are on the way. Ukrainian students, in online cooperation with Brazilian partners, are looking at aspects of LitAw such as neologisms and lexical repetition, for example.

Hopefully, the positive tendency will continue. As H.P. Cunha [1998: 11] writes in the preface to *Words in Action*, "This work is even more relevant if we consider that today language studies have been placed at the forefront of human studies. Since social and individual reality is constructed through discourse, nothing could be more appropriate than to lead young students to work creatively with language." However, to ensure that positive outcomes are to be expected, more empirical research on the way participants react to and improve their reading skills after taking LitAw workshops should be sought. This type of research "is not the only way in which we can inform ourselves and explore the world, but it is one of the most powerful, perhaps even the very best of the methods we have as humans to learn to know ourselves and the world in which we live" [van Peer 2002: 19].

Endnotes

* Although the final version of the book was published in 2002, LitAw workshops have been held in Brazil since 1989.

** S. Zyngier would like to thank FAPERJ for having sponsored her visit to Ukraine in 2006.

*** After the successful application of LitAw to the teaching of English as a Foreign Literature, the program was then adapted and extended to Brazilian students in their native language.

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