

Representational Texts as an Essential Medium for English Learning

Ling-Jung Huang

Abstract—A review of the current contents found in many EFL course textbooks would reveal a marked lack of concern for a learner's imaginative engagement with the target language. Language learning remains a rather one-dimensional learning achievement. Contemporary language learning techniques emphasize a mastery of four principal skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), but seemingly overshadow a student's relative ability to think, create, and reflect expressively through such language learning. From the perspective of meaning construction, the ignorance of the connotative aspects of representational language will have learners lose the discourse opportunity to hypothesize, defend opinions, elaborate, and speak beyond words and phrases. The study has claimed that representational texts should be introduced in the language classroom so that the learner's imagination can be called into play, and awareness that judgment and response are part of language development can be strengthened.

Index Terms—English language learning, imagination, representational texts.

I. INTRODUCTION

How can a teacher help Students Bridge the perceived gap between the skill-and-information-based instruction and the more meaning-bearing context? The answer is to implicitly incorporate representational language into the language classroom. What is representational language? Representational language, as defined by McRae (1991:3), possesses the potential meaning to be decoded and thus fully engage the receiver's imagination. To be more specifically, representational language can be decoded in several ways and the process of decoding must be worked out by the imagination. Meaning-making is realized through hypothesizing, predicting, and interpreting which allow learners to reconstruct meanings and personalize the text. It is a language which exposes learners to a more open-ended and creative aspect of a language; it is also a language which requires interpretation skills, expands cultural awareness as well as develops the basic language skills. Any language with potentials to be compelling, evocative, and creative can be categorized as representational language. In a much broader sense, representational texts are seen most often as authentic texts whose imaginative and fictional context goes beyond purely being referential. Meaning is waiting to be discovered

by the learner's employment of interpretative procedures.

II. WHY REPRESENTATIONAL LANGUAGE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

Many language practice materials are found to be mechanical and repetitive in nature. Therefore, it must be remembered that language should be used for much more than the simple conveyance of information, especially since language is best used for the expression of feelings, thoughts and emotion. There is no reason why language learning materials could not contain a touch of humor, or the possibility of imaginative involvement for the learner to become effectively engaged.

Most often, a learner's first acquaintance with register, tone, dialect, or even linguistic variety (e.g. "World Englishes") will come from an exposure to representational texts composed of songs, advertisements, poetry, and fiction or non-fiction sources. When taken from the perspective of language learning, materials providing discursive language, examples of everyday contemporary English usage, and an open frame for selective participant use are both desirable and adaptable to the teaching context. These representational materials can be useful to embrace metaphorical meanings, exemplify flexible grammatical rules and further develop learners' critical thinking skills; such materials will arouse more imaginative engagement both inside and outside the classroom experience.

One of the most easily recognizable characteristics of representational language is the fact that it remains highly connotative in nature. Readers are expected to attribute further implications to the more obvious primary meanings of a word aside from what it primarily denotes (Stewart and Santiago, 2006). Yet another characteristic of representational language is that it is not as easy for the learner to predict what is likely to come next, despite any relative discursive markers. When reading literal or referential language, understanding is assisted by background knowledge of the topic, or about the lexical sets (specialized vocabulary) in use. This is what Fairclough (1992) calls, the 'schemata of contextual meaning'. The schemata of representational texts however may be difficult to discern since they are embedded somewhere within the texts themselves. Meaning is waiting to be discovered by the reader's employment of interpretative procedures. It is interpreted in a way which isn't required in the normal reading process' (Widdowson, 1989). Representational texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning and demand that the reader be actively involved in the unstated implications and assumptions of the text (Lazar, 1993). Thus, to get inside text requires readers to in some way connect with their own

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life and then with the text itself; we do not just read the words on the page, but we respond to them in terms of personal experience, personality, opinion, and belief.

III. REPRESENTATIONAL TEXTS USED IN REAL LEARNING CONTEXT

Stanza 1

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and vallies, dales and fields,
Woods or steepy mountain yields.

Stanza 2

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

Stanza 3

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cup of flowers and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.

Stanza 4

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair-lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold.

Stanza 5

A belt of straw and ivy-buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs;
An if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

Stanza 6

The shepherd-swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.

Because of the impoverished and restricted nature of language in some course textbooks, it is often necessary for both students and teachers to use supplementary materials during instruction. Any foreign language class must not allow only for an interaction that is rote, factual, or even mechanical during the instructional process. The given classroom text rarely stimulates or encourages students to experience to feel, much less to emote. As a result, noted learning and cognition specialist Hilgard and Brower recognize the need for an integrative approach to language learning: 'purely cognitive theories of learning will be rejected unless a role is assigned to affectivity' (1966:267). Similarly, McRae strongly advocates (1991:3), 'representational texts stimulate and use areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion, from pleasure to pain, which referential language does not reach'. A fair amount of discussion related to affective learning has taken place, and it is clear that the present argument related to what form of language instruction approach should predominate in the classroom must concern itself with such an area of educational experience. Subject matter related to feelings, experiences, memories, hopes, aspirations, beliefs, and values should be thoroughly and authentically integrated into language classroom instruction. It should be noted that the affective side of learning is not found to be in opposition to the cognitive side of learning. When both parts are used in tandem, the learning process can actually be constructed on a firmer foundation (Arnold and Brown, 1999). In consideration, Tomlinson (1998) recommends the use of representational texts in the classroom for their facility in engaging the learner in both cognitive and affective activity. A recommended poem *The Passionate Shepherd to His Lover* provided at the suggestion of a teacher, for example, may be used at an intermediate

level in order to experience Nature, love, or for purposes of simple reading, or in conjunction with 'wh' questions as a follow-up. An example of the pre-reading question might be used to ask students, upon reading, to find how the imagery is used to create visual, sound, smell, and touch images in such a source. For example, as in this selection:

The poem belongs to a pastoral type and contains a lot of images. For more specific explanations in class, the teacher can illustrate all the images in each stanza for students to realize how the imagery is used in the poem. For example, the images presented in this poem are:

Stanza 2

bed of roses, a cap of flowers, a kirtle
embroidered all with leaves of myrtle, a

Stanza 3,4,5,6

belt of straw and ivy buds, with coral clasps
and amber studs.

Sound images: Melodious birds sing madrigals

Smell images: A thousand fragrant posies

Touch images: A gown made of the finest wool; fair lined slippers

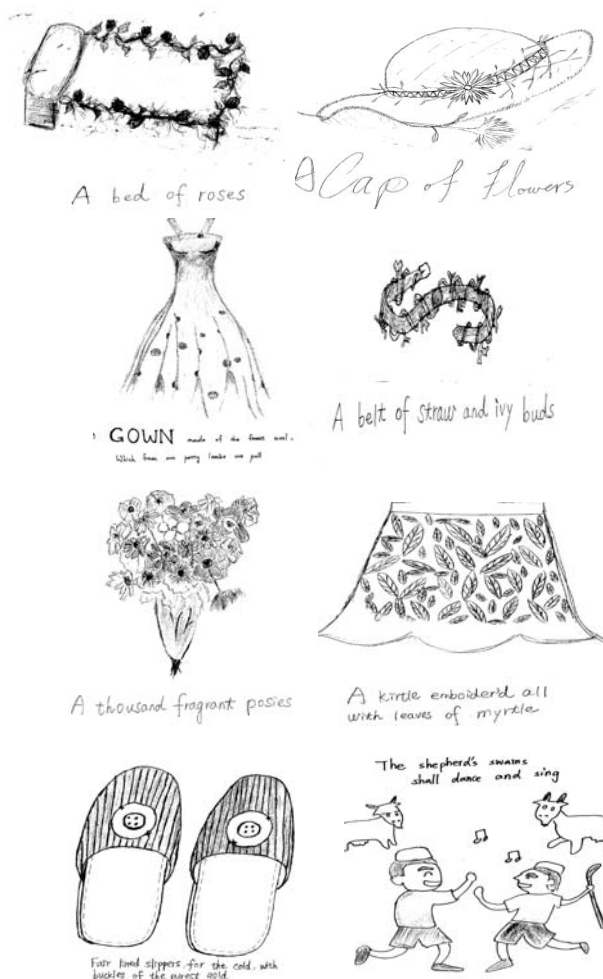


Fig. 1. Representations of the shepherd's presents for his love.

Then, follow-up questions may be phrased along the lines of, 'what presents will the shepherd make for his love?', or 'how do the presents look like?' Questions like these are not necessarily answered in words, but they may be answered in a more creative and interesting way, such as drawing. In the

following illustrative examples (see Fig.1), students are asked to answer the questions by visualizing the imagery given in the poem. At this point, a poem may become a representational text exploitable as a learning material for the interpretation and discussion of any topic area. In order to convey what the lines try to present, learners need to take a close look at every word and turn words into a drawing. By representing the text in another creative way, in fact, learners' sensitivity and awareness to the more subtle aspects of language may increase. In addition, from learners' feedback, representational texts share not just an message but a world where some of the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes people possess are universal.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

As I observe from the Taiwanese English learning context, learners remain firmly attached to the dictionary sense of one word having one meaning, with grammatical construction being fixed. Within such a rigid context, learners are not granted a greater chance to experience, interpret, and use language in its more creative aspects (Carter, 2007; Maley, 2007). Though texts of the representational kind may be difficult for learners to cope with at first, they can be challenging and give learners an opportunity for interpretation in terms of what they have already known, and thus learn something new. This situation allows both teachers and learners to explore text features outside of their personal interest, either alone or by cooperating with others. Overall, representational texts provide a room for language class to embrace more diversity of outcomes from the individual learner's own interpretation of the situation, event, or transaction. Learner participation and involvement with texts stimulates increased motivational opportunities in language learning. The direct exchange of the ideas help learners sort out the complexities and difficulties found in the texts. Thus, learners by reading and experiencing the texts are more likely

to discover the connection between language and emotions, language and culture, language and themselves (Hewitt, 2008 Burke, 2011).

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Ling Jung Huang got her MA degree in English language teaching from the university of Nottingham in 2003. From teaching in junior high school, senior high school, to university, she has 12-year experience of teaching English. She is interested in how to integrate the motivating aspects of literary or non-literary English texts into the teaching of composition, grammar, vocabulary building, and reading. Her study is mainly concerned with enlivening students by selecting texts for students to participate imaginatively in the process of language learning. She is now a full-time assistant professor in Department of Applied English, Chia Nan University of Pharmacy and Science, Tainan, Taiwan. She is also a member of General Education of Taiwan.