

Language-based Approaches! What? How? And Why?

By A. Soe Than

‘My dear friend, a lot of water has flowed under our bridge.’

I dedicate this paper to my colleagues in the English department who have often asked me what sort of method or approach we are using in the new English I and English II curricula introduced in June 2003 semester.

In my attempt to answer that knotty question, I am required to come up with some specific names encompassing the old and the new curricula and their respective teaching methods. Conveniently, but crudely, we may call the old method “The Grammar-based Comprehension Approach” and the new “The Language-based Approaches”. In what follows, I will try to briefly review the classroom activities and teaching procedures involved in these two language teaching methods.

The Grammar-based Comprehension Approach

Among English language teachers in Thailand, this approach is well known by other names such as the Grammar-Translation Method, the Comprehension Approach and the Comprehension-based Grammar Approach. Although termed differently, all these approaches mean teaching a small number of reading texts with an emphasis on grammar rules and vocabulary learning. ‘Intensive reading’ and ‘grammatical accuracy’ are the hallmarks of these approaches.

Although such language teaching methods as Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based language learning, which are currently popular in other countries, are being used in some privately-run language schools and in the British Council in Thailand, their popularity has never reached the formal/institutional English language teaching context such as secondary or tertiary classrooms in Thailand. The reasons are that these popular teaching methods work better with small classes, preferably taught by native-speaking or English speaking teacher. And ideally, students are expected to speak English in class while performing tasks and communicative language activities.

But the English classes in this part of the world, at all levels, are invariably very large. The number of students ranges from minimum 30 to maximum 60 to 80 in one class. This ‘size’ of the class alone makes it practically impossible for English teachers to successfully adopt or even ‘try out’ some other currently popular teaching methods. Conveniently, most institutions continue using the age-old ‘Grammar-Translation’ approach, in which the size of the class does not matter as there are no pair work and group work activities involved. The teacher ‘explains’ everything about the text mostly in the students’ L1. The ‘reading text’ chosen is not necessarily

a literary text – it could be anything ‘non-fiction’ from a newspaper article, history, and geography to a scientific piece. The main purpose is just to read ‘the text’ and understand everything in it and about it. The teacher slowly explains the meaning of the text word by word, and line by line by translating it into students’ L1.

In that sort of English language class, students play a very ‘passive’ role. They listen to the teacher’s explanation, copy the notes, copy the ‘translated’ meanings of the unknown words in the text, copy the teacher’s ‘model’ answers to the comprehension questions that follow the reading passage. Then the teacher will give students a list of vocabulary with meanings explained in the students’ L1. Students copy them and later on they will commit them to memory for the exam. Then, on a ‘grammar day’, the teacher will introduce a certain structure to students such as ‘Active/Passive Voice’. After explaining its meaning and usage with examples, students are given some ‘drills’ – a number of sentences to be converted to active or passive voice. Students copy out these sentences and do the exercise. Then the teacher randomly checks their answers, and finally, he writes the correct answers on the board and students are asked to copy them.

All in all, the Grammar-based Comprehension Approach is a totally teacher-centered way of teaching a foreign language. Adherents to this approach view ‘reading and writing’ as the primary skills to be developed. Little or no attention is given to speaking and listening. In order to achieve the primary skills, they believe, students need to learn about grammar rules and vocabulary of the target language. Students study the grammar deductively. They are given the explicit grammar rules and examples, are told to memorize them, and then are asked to apply the rules to other examples. The role of the teacher is very traditional: the teacher is the authority in the classroom. Most of the interaction in the classroom is from the teacher to the students. There is very little student initiation and almost no student-student interaction as there is no class discussion in the form of pair work or group work involved in this approach.

The Language-based Approaches

Proponents of Language-based approaches believe that literary texts are valuable language teaching resources, which should not always be treated in a traditional, teacher-centered way. They contend that teaching of English language in many foreign countries still pays a lop-sided attention to grammar rules and does not promote the language proficiency of students. They believe that in ESL/EFL, opportunities should be sought for more extensive and integrated study of language and literature than is commonly the case at present. And they consider language-based study skills as important preliminary activities to reading literature.

Advocates of the language-based approaches consider certain language-based study skills to be important preliminary activities to studying literary texts. They propose many familiar language classroom activities to be used in presenting literary texts to students. These activities include prediction, cloze procedure, choosing the best summary, matching, etc., which are likely to be unthreatening to students. Accordingly, these activities may bridge the gap between the necessary language study and the development of valuable literary skills.

The following language-based teaching strategies to be used with literary texts are well known for aiding students in 'opening up the literary text and releasing its meanings'.

1. jigsaw reading or jumbled sentence activity
2. cloze activity (a part of the literary text with certain words deleted for students to fill in the gaps)
3. prediction exercise (what the text is going to be about? What will happen next in the story?)
4. matching
5. true/false questions
6. choosing the best summary
7. reading aloud
8. media transfer (rewriting the text in other genres)
9. ranking
10. comparison and contrast (of characters in a text, or of a text with the other text(s))
11. rewriting the text from another point of view
12. many other textual intervention activities such as reduction, expansion and reconstruction of the text.

These language-based teaching strategies constitute activity-based, student-centered ways of dealing with literary texts. But these strategies may not work well in over-crowded classes since they require pair-work and group-work. And teachers using these approaches need to decide what particular activities may work well with a given literary work under study since it may not be possible to go through all the procedures with every text. Teachers need to choose discreetly only the activities that will help the process of negotiation between the text and students. It has to be emphasized again that it is not advisable to employ all these activities with every text with 'monstrous regularity' in 'mechanical fashion' as tedium breeds demotivation in students. After using some of these language-based activities to provide a 'way-in' to the text, students should be later on given ample fuller opportunities to come up with their own opinions and interpretations of the text through comparing and contrasting it with other texts.

The 'Elementary' Stylistic Analysis Approach

Proponents of a Stylistic Analysis approach believe that it can be employed not only in advanced level ESL literature major classes, but also in EFL lower level classrooms as a useful tool to help students acquire language skills through literature, and develop a literary sensibility. They claim that stylistic analysis may lead students to a fuller understanding and evaluation of a literary work by paying close attention to the language of the text.

Proponents of this approach contend that the traditional teacher-centered way of teaching literature discourages students from seeking out messages in a text for themselves. They suggest that the teacher's role be changed from the one who lectures to students, revealing what messages are to be found in a literary text, to the one who gives them guidance on what to look for in a text.

There are two steps involved in analyzing a literary text for classroom use. The first step is 'foregrounding', i.e. the teacher notes down any linguistic features that are particularly noticeable. And the second step is the teacher develops series of questions that alert students to these features, and encourages students to reach an interpretation of the text bearing these features in mind.

While looking for linguistic features to be 'foregrounded' in a literary work, teachers should pay attention to the following:

1. The features that recur with unexpected frequency in the text.
2. The features that deviate slightly from what might be considered more grammatically or lexically usual.
3. The features which would produce a very different effect if they were paraphrased or rewritten in a slightly different way.

We should bear in mind that Stylistics is considered a branch of the language-based approaches to literature teaching. And it is a common belief among adherents to these approaches that the learner-centered, activity-based and language-based approaches mentioned previously should be exposed to students 'prior to' stylistic analysis of a literary text.

While trying to incorporate these features in the new English I and English II curricula, in order to suit the level of our students, I have adopted a modified version of what might be called 'elementary' stylistic analysis. The analysis involves neither burdensome critical metalanguage nor rigorous statistical studies of style such as range of vocabulary, sentence length or frequency of certain conjunctions, etc. Instead, some questions that point to the unusual features in the text (such questions as 'What tense is mainly used in the text? Why?'; 'Why is a certain word repeated several times?'; 'Why is the definite article used?'; 'Why is the possessive pronoun used?', etc.) are incorporated in the Task-sheet together with the other language-based activities to prompt students to consider the writer's choice of language items to account for their opinions and interpretations. In other words, this kind of questioning is hoped to illustrate to students how grammar is employed by authors to communicate meanings and effects. In essence, these 'elementary' stylistic analyses are meant to make students aware that grammar is not to be memorized simply to pass the English exams, rather they have to learn to see, through these analyses, how grammar has to be effectively employed for communicative purposes. These analyses may also illustrate to students that they can make use of their knowledge of formal grammar rules in digging up the meaning potential of a text.

In the beginning of this paper, I have reported that the Grammar-based Comprehension approach is a totally teacher-centered way of teaching which treats a literary text as a 'product', ignoring the 'process' of text formation and not allowing students the experience of going through the 'process' of arriving at meaning(s) of a text on their own. I would also like to stress again that it's time we rid ourselves of the old-fashioned and counterproductive teaching of 'vocabulary lists' and decontextualised 'grammar drills' as that kind of teaching breeds only boredom, demotivation, and worst of all, hatred of the English language in students.

In closing, I would like to argue that using the Language-based and 'Elementary' Stylistic Analysis approaches would promote students' involvement with the reading materials and interaction in the class as these approaches comprise varied and interesting language-based and student-centered activities that would gradually lead students on to the mastery of literary skills. When assigned group works and pair works to do these activities, students would be encouraged to be involved in more confident and fluent discussion about literary texts. Students are given "freedom" to come up with their own interpretations and opinions. But they would also learn from these activities that mere impressions and feelings on their own are not adequate. What they need is a careful reference to the text to back up their views.

One important writing task involved in the Language-based approaches, which is known as Creative Writing – some textual intervention activities such as reduction, expansion and reconstruction, would allow students to look at a text from inside, not from outside. They become 'active participants' in the text by becoming one of the characters and rewriting/recreating the text with a shift in point of view. Finally, unlike in the traditional teacher-centered way of teaching, the teacher using the Language-based approaches does not 'lecture' to students; instead, he/she gives them guidance, through the use of task-sheets, to what to look for in a text, or what messages are to be found in a literary text.

But it would do very well for us to remember occasionally that there are neither quick fixes nor simple answers to such difficult questions as the ones we are currently faced with in our daily endeavor of English as a foreign language teaching/learning. It would be next to impossible for us to come up with a satisfactory answer to every pedagogic issue, for instance, why a certain teaching method fails to work in our teaching context while the same method works wonders in English classes in another country. There are simply too many factors to be taken into consideration when trying to understand such a complex issue as language teaching/learning where human beings are involved – on one hand, teachers' qualifications, personality, experience, willingness to keep abreast with the current developments in the language teaching profession, and enthusiasm to experiment with the new methods and materials; on the other hand, students' motivation, attitude, their background knowledge of the target language and its culture or lack of that knowledge, and most importantly, the institutional constraints!

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