

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LITERARY TEXT IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of literary narratives for the teaching of English at a moment when English is associated with all the cultures where it is spoken both as foreign or second language. The literary narrative is foremost in this process because it can be understood as a contact zone that allows both a linguistic and cultural counterpoint.

Keywords: English, as an international language; literature; teaching.

INTRODUCTION

■ **A**s Henry Giroux (2005) has pointed out, new historical developments imply new conflicts and ask for new discourses and projects. Such a moment of rupture is happening at the present moment when English has passed from being considered a national to an international language (RAJAGOPALAN, 2008), a process discussed by Ashcroft et al. (1989) already in the 1980s when, talking about post-colonial literature, they marked the transition from English to a variety of *englishes*. These linguistic varieties of the English language have to do, in turn, with the cultural diversity of the different places where the language is spoken.

McKay (2002, p. 81) also says that this new focus on the relationship between culture and language brings, in turn, a reconsideration of the teaching and learning process of the English language, as regards discourse competence: should students go on acquiring "native speaking standards, when the number

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of 'non-native speakers' is higher than that of 'native speakers'"; the cultural assumptions that inform teaching methods: consideration of local theories of learning; the selection of cultural materials in the classroom: teaching topics that go beyond the linguistic to consider the cultural.

In this new context, the literary text becomes foremost since it can be understood as a contact zone that raises not only linguistic but also cross-cultural awareness in the sense that the learner gets in contact with the different cultures where the target language is spoken. At another level, this critical view of the Other should encourage a critical view of the student's own culture. Thus understood, the literary text is central to an approach to the teaching of English that goes beyond linguistic training to become an act of education because it engages the learner in a critical act of reflection.

THE LITERARY TEXT AND ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

As is well known, during the colonial period the English took their language around the world. Ahmad (2007, p. 19) explains that this process happened in three waves. In the settler colonies, United States, Canada, South Africa and Australia, the language assumed new forms, when the settlers engaged in totally new experiences and the language adapted to the new circumstances. In the trading colonies, like India and Nigeria, pidgin forms of the language evolved into creoles. Across the Caribbean and in the South of the United States emerged a new form of English, "West African English", when the slaves arrived on the plantations and their own languages were banned. In all these places, the language found new forms among the local residents.

In this process, Great Britain spread a particular dialect of the English language around the world as if it were the only possible rendering of the language. This dialect belonged, as Ahmad (2007, p. 18) explains, to "the groups responsible for compiling dictionaries and assembling grammar manuals". Hence, in the 18th and 19th centuries opposing forces affected the English language. While at home Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster tried to regularize it through the writing of grammars and dictionaries, a whole variety of *englishes* escaped their control and flourished both within Great Britain and around the world giving rise to new forms of the language and new literary traditions.

This indigenization of the language took special force during the anti-colonial struggles of the 20th century, when the former colonies fought in order to achieve their independence from England. At that moment, the English language started changing its status from a language of domination to a language of resistance because the colonized saw the political potential of vernacular English: they could voice their discontent through a form of the language that articulated their cultural identity while being understood by the English, to whom their discourse of protest was directed.

Through this process, it has become more and more clear that English is not tied to any country or culture in particular but that it belongs to those who use it. As Ahmad (2007, p. 17) remarks, more than through a process of "denationalization", English went through a process of "re-nationalization", when it was appropriated by all those cultures where it is spoken. George Lamming (apud AHMAD, 2007, p. 21) puts it in the following way: "English is no longer

the exclusive language of men who live in England. That stopped being a long time ago”.

As these new forms of the English language were transformed into national languages in the former colonies, they came to challenge the “standard vs. non-standard” and “language vs. dialect” divides in which the first member of the pair was associated with England and the second with the different cultures where the new forms of the English language was spoken. This difference implied not only a linguistic but also a cultural hierarchy. The first one being associated with the original and unique form of the language that only native speakers could produce and the second with some rarified rendering of the language, the result of its contact with many local languages, common among non-native speakers. Likewise, this dichotomy implied the superiority and sophistication of the English culture against the more primitive quality of the local cultures.

However, when these new forms of the language reached the level of national languages, thus defying their qualification as dialects, with their own cultural and literary traditions, backed up by the formation of new cultural identities, the Standard English spread during the period of colonization became one dialect among many or one possible form of the language among many, thus changing the status of the English language.

This process of vernacularization brought about changes at a grammatical, lexical, phonological and discursive levels. In turn, contesting the language hierarchy, through the use of these new forms of English, meant contesting the cultural and social hierarchy because being exposed to these new *englishes* meant being exposed not only to linguistic but also cultural differences.

As McKay (2002, p. 81) points out, this new relationship between culture and language has brought about a reconsideration of the teaching and learning process of English that takes into account not only the linguistic but also the cultural aspect from a critical perspective.

In this context, I believe the literary text to be of great relevance because as aesthetics can be understood as epistemological systems that articulate different ways of understanding the world, the literary texts become “windows to new worlds”. Besides, the affective quality of the literary metaphor helps grab the reader’s attention and interest, thus being much more effective than narratives belonging to other genres that introduce themes of great relevance, such as race, identity, gender, in an abstract manner and, therefore, are more difficult to understand. For all these reasons, literary texts present themselves as being more effective to cross not only linguistic, but also cultural borders.

Chamberlin (2004, p. 218) explains that our stories give meaning to our lives since they articulate our values and beliefs, thus keeping us all together. But, as they mark our difference, they separate “us” from “them”. When we are confronted with “their” stories, we become aware of cultural difference. And, immediately, a counterpoint is established between “their” culture and “ours”.

The idea is that this counterpoint should lead us not to accept the values of the Other in detriment of ours (as many currently used books for the teaching of English suggest), or to reject the values of the Other, because considered inferior to our own, but to a process of cross-cultural awareness that is not a process of

indoctrination, does not mean a promotion of other cultures per se, does not imply the acquisition of culturally influenced behavior, but implies seeing our culture in relation to the Other's, trying to understand "their" values, at the time that we come to problematize "ours".

When understood in this way, the literary text becomes a contact zone. Borrowing Pratt's (1992, p. 43) words: "an area where culturally and geographically distant people get in contact in a relationship of difference and conflict". As we can see, this relationship is not a harmonic one that does away with difference but a dialogical relationship that considers conflict in order to rethink and revalue difference at a linguistic, literary and cultural level. Understood in this way, these many *englishes* in which the literary narratives are articulated become contact languages and the literary narratives become contact narratives as they help deconstruct cultural clichés and stereotypes and promote both linguistic and social agency.

In turn, this process of familiarization and de-familiarization reconsiders the relationship among narrator, text and reader, in which the reader becomes a new narrator, imbued with social agency, as it leads the student to the creation of new meanings, expressed in the target language.

Reading the literary text in the English class moves from an interpretative reading that affirms formal or established readings of the literary narrative, to a critical reading, that implies the creation of new meanings, to a transcultural reading that implies a counterpoint among the cultural contexts of the different narratives and *englishes* implied in the text in a relationship of difference and conflict. Thus understood, the literary narrative is foremost in this process because if the "text" is a paradigm for grammatical structures, that focuses on grammatical or structural meaning, the "story" provides referential meaning connecting the "word" with the "world" (FREIRE, 2005). This approach to the literary narrative helps students develop their linguistic skills, serves the purpose of communication and promotes social and cultural change.

In order to illustrate this process, I will refer to the novel *Sozaboy. A Novel in Rotten English* by the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa (1985). The thematic thread will be "cultural and grammatical violence" and the reading strategy, the interpretation of conflicting *englishes* within the novel from a linguistic and social perspective.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was well known not only as a writer but also as a television producer and environmentalist. He was the founder of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (Mosop), one of the ethnic minorities that form Nigeria; he was executed in 1996, when fighting for the cause of his people.

The name of his novel, *Sozaboy. A Novel in Rotten English*, already shows his view of the English language as well as the post-colonial writer's tendency towards disdaining propriety and respectability in his urge to narrate the harsh realities of his people. Like most postcolonial fiction, it is an autobiographical novel that through a personal story, actually tells the history of the country. The fictional time of the novel corresponds to the period of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), when citizens were drafted for the war among the rival ethnic groups in Nigeria, an outcome of the post-colonial period, when the colonizer had left and the different ethnic groups were fiercely against each other.

Saro-Wiwa (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 1-2) thought that “literature in a critical situation such as Nigeria’s cannot be divorced from politics [...] literature must serve society [...] writers [...] must play an interventionist role”. I believe that in his novel Saro-Wiwa articulates this need for intervention through his rendering of the English language. As Gunn (2008, p. 3) explains, the new version of English which he famously defines as “Rotten English” and is a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and idiomatic English “helps cross ethnic and cultural barriers and allows a critique of all parties involved in the Nigerian Civil War”. A hybrid language for a hybrid nation.

Hence, in order to recreate the fractures within the community, Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote his novel both in Standard and Vernacular English. He thus revealed that, like most Post-colonial writers, he was a master of code switching (AHMAD, 2007, p. 25), utilizing one rendering or the other of the language for his own purpose: passing social and political critique.

One of the most outstanding passages of the novel narrates the moment when the police arrives at the local square of some community within the Ogoni community and starts summoning the group of men playing football to the church:

So one afternoon as we were playing football one policeman came and told us that we must go to the church now now. Church from football? With sweat on our bodies? This policeman must be stupid What is his trouble, anyway? Can policeman confuse himself like this? If it is kotuma, somebody will understand. Because after all kotuma is just man with small education, no plenty job, just chopping small small bribe from woman or man in Dukana. But police is big man going on transfer from Lagos to Kano and so on. And he can be promoted too to sarzent, then inspector and so on. So it is no good that he should confuse himself. So, nevertheless, since he say we must go to church, we all begin to go there. Everybody. Are we going to pray in the church, and today is not Sunday? Will this police force us to begin to pray? Ha! (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 391).

In order to re-create the many voices of the community, the narrative begins in the first person plural, fledging different linguistic forms that reveal social status and conflicting attitudes. There is a criss-crossing of high sounding words in standard English, like “nevertheless”; words in vernacular English like “so-za” (soldier) or “sarzent” (sergeant); words in Kana, the local language, like “Kotuma” or “Dukana”. At a syntactic level, the influence of the local language shows itself in the lack of articles, prepositions and plurals and the use of the present tense to show immediacy. Also, the English language acquires a new sonority through the repetition of words that mimics the syntax and cadence of Kana. All that to show the surprise of the narrative person at being summoned so unexpectedly.

In the transcription of the language used, Ken Saro-Wiwa is actually transcribing the national crisis in which the Ogoni people found themselves trapped. Only that the non-hierarchical way in which he presents the different versions of English also implies a non-hierarchical view of his country, as the ones in power are mocked from the perspective of the subjugated ones, and the victimized are, for once, given voice. Rotten English becomes the language in which deepest fear is felt and Standard English the language in which fear is created.

The man in fine shirt sat down and we all sat down too. Plenty of talking. "Silence!" shouted the police. "Silence, I say". The people cannot understand him. They were laughing because of how he was shouting. Myself too, I was laughing. Then the police came to where I was sitting and used his stick on my head. Everybody kept quiet. I stopped laughing by force. That is how my own things are. Every time trouble. Always. So I kept quiet with several people shouting little shouts inside my head from the policeman's stick's blow. I said to myself "trouble don begin" (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 392).

The narrative voice turns into the first person singular, when the narrator, the Sozaboy of the title, assumes the position of a linguistic and cultural translator, the nexus between the authority and the people that, though members of the same nation, speak different languages. From this perspective, he positions himself within and without the community, simultaneously, interpreting the events in a linguistic and ideological counterpoint that implies switching registers, depending on who is being characterized and voiced. Thus, the different forms of English utilized imply social identification.

His use of Standard English is markedly ironic since it has a double purpose or signification. On the one hand, though an ordinary member of the community, he shows his masterful use of the language. On the other hand, he does not do it to mimic the white community and show his submission to it but to actually mock the authority and to show that, though he uses Vernacular English, he can use the Standard form when he pleases. He also understands language as a tool of power that he can make work for his own purposes. What transpires in his words is fear and distrust:

The man with fine shirt stood up. And begin to talk in English. Fine fine English. Big big words. Grammar. "Fantastic. Overwhelming. Generally. In particular and in general". But he did not stop there. The big grammar continued. "Odious. Destruction. Fighting". I understand that one. "Henceforth. General Mobilisation. All citizens. Ablebodied. Join the military. His Excellency. Powers conferred on us. Volunteers. Conscription". Big big words. Long long grammar. "Ten Heads. Vandals. Enemy". Everybody was silent. Everywhere was silent like burial ground. Then they begin to interpret all that long grammar plus big words in Kana. In short, what the man is saying is that all those who can fight will join the army (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 393).

Once again, the narrative voice changes to third person singular to single out the authority figure that stands out among the people gathered in the church: a high rank policeman, dressed in a silk shirt, who is clearly from outside the community. His distinctive use of Standard English, through the use of high sounding words, "Henceforth. General Mobilisation", dramatizes grammatical and cultural violence. The narrator points out, through the mimicking of the character, how correct grammar and high sounding language can be associated with authority and fear. He conveys it through a rendering of Standard English that shows his dominion of the language.

So I am now a soza. No. No. I cannot be soza. Soza for what? [...] Then the sozas started running after me. Oh my father wey don die, help me today. Put power inside my body [...] What kain of trouble be dis? [...] I am afraid of the sozas. I do not want to join the sozas. [...] Oh, Jesus. You know. I am young boy. I have

never do anybody any bad thing since they born me. You know I love my neighbour as myself. Even I am good Samaritan several times. I have not called another man's wife. I have not tief another person money. I not go juju house. Forgive my tresspasses (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 392).

Once the narrator has been drafted and has become a “soza”, we are inside his mind and the narrative strategy applied is that of stream of consciousness. Through a highly functional direct interior monologue, the character's voice becomes one with the voice of his people persecuted by the police, to participate in the Nigerian Civil War. At this point his own personal story becomes the history of the community, rendered in a form of the Vernacular that expresses the people's fear.

In despair, the character starts a frenzied run in order to escape from the soldiers:

I run until I get back to the church in Dukana. Now nobody in the church at all. Now I look through the window of the church and I see all the sozas, very many of them moving like forest towards the church. They were not shooting again. They were singing very loud:

My father don't worry
My mother don't worry
If I happen to die in the battle field
Never mind we shall meet again

We are sozas marching for our nation.

In the name of Jesus we shall conquer (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 395)

At this point of the narrative, the voice of authority and the voice of religion become one. Clearly Standard English becomes the discourse of subjugation and power, articulated through the songs sung in the church, in which the name of Jesus and some concept of the nation that tries to wipe out minority groups, are invoked in the same verse. Meanwhile Vernacular English is identified with the voice of the people, expressing their excruciating anguish.

Ah, so it is all a dream. Very bad dream. Already, day don begin to break. My mama come to ask me why I am calling her. I told her that I was dreaming... My mama told me that she too have been dreaming how aeroplane came to Dukana and dropped big big mortars on top of the church and how everybody was afraid and running about and hiding and calling God to help them. Well, well, well, this dream and my own are almost identical. What can it mean? And now everyday they were talking more and more about the war. The radio was shouting about it all the time. And they were saying that everybody must be ready for it. Trouble! (apud GUNN, 2008, p. 396).

The character wakes up to realize that his terrible experience has been a dream, thus mixing fiction and reality. However, the fact that his mother has also had exactly the same dream reveals to him his worst fear: this communal nightmare is a premonition of the bloody war that is about to start and that is confirmed by the radio speaker. At this moment, the voice on the radio in Standard English becomes the voice of war and violence, while Vernacular English, the voice of the people is the voice of suffering.

Approached in this way, the literary text gains new depth and complexity; it goes beyond the level of formal analysis to acquire social relevance, as “their” stories” are approached in a critical way from “our” perspective. In turn, when this reading of the literary narrative becomes part of the English class, the teaching of English goes beyond the linguistic to become an act of critical reflection, as vocabulary and syntax are not taught just as elements in some abstract and universal act of communication, as traditionally done when English is associated with Great Britain or United States, but as a culturally situated practice that has to do with the way the student understands the culture he is being exposed to from his own cultural perspective.

CONCLUSION

All this comes to show is that language is not an abstract and universal system. Different languages will acquire different forms and significations when appropriated by different communities. Language is not just a means of communication, as if it were some neutral system. It is an instrument of power, a tool of inclusion and exclusion that marks the relationship among different cultures. Therefore, it is both a linguistic and a socio-cultural practice.

Likewise, as Helen Tiffin (1994) points out, teaching literature will not save the world. It will not put an end to cultural difference, but it can help us understand how linguistic and cultural oppression work. It can thus contribute to the creation of a critical concept of citizenship and, therefore, should be an integral part of the English language class.

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Resumo: *Este artigo apresenta uma proposta de inclusão das narrativas literárias nas aulas de língua inglesa, em um momento em que o inglês é associado com todas as culturas em que ele é falado como língua estrangeira ou segunda língua. A ideia é que a narrativa literária pode ser entendida como uma zona de contato que permite a interação não só linguística, como também cultural.*

Palavras-chave: *inglês como língua internacional; literatura; ensino.*