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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to measure students' assessments and attitudes in two college English literature classes at Lehigh University, one in which the approach was traditional and one in which material derived from linguistics, literary theory, or philosophy of language was added. Students in the non-traditional class received additional information in the form of lectures and handouts that students in the traditional class did not receive, and during the semester they applied these new insights to the literature they studied. Two case studies were conducted with students from the non-traditional class. A series of interviews with the two students indicated that despite their very different orientations and attitudes, both students found something of value in the non-traditional approach used in the class. Four conclusions were drawn from the case studies: (1) the approach has some value and at least warrants further investigation, perhaps in the form of more narrowly defined, more tightly focused studies; (2) students respond well to challenging materials; (3) each student will take from the approach what he or she finds of importance in it at a given moment; and (4) what a student gets out of a course depends on a number of complex factors (student's orientation and attitude, the kind of literature used, the kind of linguistic insights used, and the commitment and enthusiasm of the teacher). (MG)

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Enhancing Metalinguistic Awareness in the Literature Classroom: Two Case Studies

I would like to talk about a study that I conducted last spring at Lehigh University where I am completing my graduate work. At that time I taught two sections of English 2, which at Lehigh is a combination introduction to literature and composition course and fulfills the second half of the freshman composition requirement. Both sections were very much the same. Each had approximately the same number of students with similar backgrounds who all did the same number of assignments, and, with one exception, used the same material. The classes differed in one significant way, however. In one class my students used a traditional approach and in the other a non-traditional approach to discuss the literature they studied. By traditional I mean looking at literature in a familiar light, e.g., focusing on the elements of plot, setting, character, and theme in conjunction with the short story and novel, and looking at form, figures of speech, and imagery in connection with poetry. In other words, the kind of approach that most freshman students are familiar with from high school. By non-traditional I mean with an obvious added dimension of study. In the non-traditional class I added material

derived from linguistics, literary theory, and philosophy of language--whatever seemed appropriate for a given genre, or whatever would call students' attention to the language of a text. My choices were eclectic, based in large measure on what I had found helpful myself. So students in the non-traditional class received additional information, in the form of lectures and handouts, that students in the traditional class did not, and during the semester they applied these new insights to the literature they studied.

I used this approach for a number of reasons. First, I had found such material helpful in my own study of literature, and I noticed that whenever I introduced a theoretical or analytical view of language into my teaching, even on a very small scale, students expressed an unusual interest in it and wanted to know more. This observation led me to wonder what might happen if a linguistic awareness component were made an integral part of an entire course. Second, I wanted to underscore how literary texts achieve meaning in a more systematic and obvious way than is generally done to see how students would respond. And third, I wanted to enhance students' awareness of how language functions in non-literary texts as well, because I believe that such awareness can make them better critics of the language they hear everyday and can enhance their ability to define themselves as individuals since language is so intricately tied to thoughts and perceptions.

Simply stated, I wanted students in the non-traditional class to see that language can be a subject of study, and not just the

medium by which other subjects are studied, that it is not merely a symbol system used to convey pre-existent information about reality but one that actively shapes reality, and that it does have a power and practical value that is not beyond their ability to master. Of course, none of these ideas are new, but most students, especially freshmen, are not aware of them. They take language for granted because it is so much a part of their lives, and because it is so much a part of their lives, they find it very difficult to gain the needed perspective to see language itself as a subject of study. Their difficulties are compounded by the fact that we cannot speak about language without using language, so that subject and medium of study are identical. Most students beginning their study of literature are not presented with such dilemmas; however, some of mine were, and they responded with a refreshing amount of curiosity and energy.

To illustrate, let me now give you a brief summary of the additional information we covered in the non-traditional class. In connection with the short story my students worked with Bakhtin's idea of competing voices in a text. They identified what voices they heard, how they were in conflict, and what the conflicts might mean. In connection with poetry they worked with the Formalist concept of foregrounding and they identified what they felt was being foregrounded or defamiliarized in the poems we read, and what impact that foregrounding had on the meaning of the poems. In connection with drama they worked with extra-verbal features of communication--the importance of context, intent, and

desired response. And finally, in connection with the novel they considered ideas, derived from the work of Max Black and Benjamin Lee Whorf, about how language affects our perceptions and reflects culture. In other words, I used whatever I felt would draw their attention to how the language of a text conveys meaning.

Realizing that I could not quantitatively measure students' assessments and attitudes, I chose to use a case study approach instead. Quite frankly, I began with the simple question "what if?" What if I taught a course with this added dimension of study? How would freshmen respond to it? I asked four students in the traditional class and five in the non-traditional class to meet with me individually at three different times during the semester and give me their assessments. I chose these students on the basis of things they had said about themselves, in informal in-class writings and interviews, about their academic orientations and what value they saw in the study of literature. I wanted some variety among the case studies in these areas because I was curious to see if a difference in orientation and attitude made a difference in how a student responded--especially in the non-traditional class.

I would like to use the remainder of my time to discuss how two of my case studies from the non-traditional class responded to the unfamiliar approach we used--Claire, an arts-oriented student, and Chris, a science-oriented student.

In Interview #1, conducted after the short story and poetry segments of the course, I asked students to say a little more

about their academic orientations and their answers to the "Why study literature?" question. I also asked for their assessments of the first two sections of the course.

In this interview Claire identifies herself without hesitation as an arts student, who finds math and science boring, but words "exciting." Claire sees literature as a way of exploring her own imagination and enhancing her creativity. She speaks of imaginatively entering fictional worlds and becoming part of them. Her assessment of our language awareness approach is positive. She feels that looking at language is more interesting than concentrating on traditional elements. She especially likes the non-traditional approach to poetry because it is easy for her to see poetry as a manipulation of language. The only thing she doesn't like about the approach is my use of technical terms, which she feels unnecessary because, for her, the concepts themselves, not their names, are important.

Chris, on the other hand, makes it clear in Interview #1 that he is a science student, and he feels that literature is of value primarily as a means of escape from more practical concerns and subjects of study. His response to the course's added dimension is interesting. He hasn't noticed it! He insists throughout the interview that he is doing the same "stuff" he has always done in English classes, even though I constantly remind him that we have done new "stuff" in this class.

This interview was particularly enlightening for me because at the very beginning of the semester I had explained to students

in the non-traditional class what I planned to do and why, and I simply assumed that everyone in class recognized how the course was unique. However, Chris proves that I was wrong. His inability to see what is happening in the course can be the result of two things. First, because of his attitude toward literature, he is not taking the course seriously, and second, because of his orientation, he simply cannot see that language itself can be a subject of study.

At this point in the semester, then, Claire and Chris represent two disparate positions. Claire grasps the significance of what we are doing and responds to it, whereas Chris is oblivious to it. Their different orientations may influence these different viewpoints. However, I think it's more a question of attitude. Claire sees value in the study of English, and Chris doesn't, so he doesn't pay much attention to it.

In Interview #2, conducted after the drama and novel sections of the course, I asked case study students to identify what they felt was an advantage and a disadvantage with each of these segments. They had read Hamlet and Waiting For Godot in the drama section of the course, and Ursula LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness in the novel section.

In Interview #2, Claire's position remains more or less consistent with the position she established in Interview #1. She again responds positively to both sections of the course because she likes looking at texts in the new, non-traditional way. She especially likes Beckett's play and LeGuin's novel because the

works themselves are a departure from the traditional. Beckett's play i not a conventional drama in any sense, and LeGuin's novel, a science fiction tale set on the fictional planet Gethen, employs some invented language and is told through a number of different viewpoints. Because each employs an unusual form, I think Claire finds it difficult to immerse herself in their fictional realities and is forced to maintain an objective stance toward them instead. Because in each case the text draws attention to itself in a very obvious way, it's not possible to look past it, at least not right away. However, she doesn't dismiss these works because of their unusual form. In fact, she seems to like both unfamiliar subject matter and unfamiliar forms. In this interview Claire also expresses some impatience with other members of the class who find these unusual works difficult because they aren't immediately accessible, and she seems annoyed with students who aren't willing to expend the mental energy these works require. Her own strong language skills probably make it hard for her to comprehend the difficulties other students have with such texts.

In Interview #2 Chris's responses suggest a change in attitude. While he still says that he prefers a traditional approach, he now indicates that he is aware of the course's added dimension and even concedes that it is a new and different way for him to look at literature. Nonetheless, he maintains that a lot of what we are doing still "just goes right over [his] head." He responds most positively to LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness, and his comments about the novel indicate that he is aware of one

of the key concepts we discussed in this segment of the course--how culture can be reflected in language. He demonstrates an awareness in this interview that is completely missing in Interview #1. Although he still maintains that our work with language is not important, at one point in the interview he shrugs and says, "I don't know. I could be wrong." Perhaps Chris finds it easier to comprehend the linguistic material used in connection with drama and the novel because it relates more to how language operates in a real world environment and less to how it is structured. In any case, I was pleased to hear that he had "caught on."

In the final wrap-up interview, conducted after the semester had ended, I asked case studies to give their assessments of the final section of the course, which in the non-traditional class consisted of a unit on the language of advertising. I also asked them some general questions about the course as a whole: "If you could go back and choose between our course and a more traditional one, which would you choose?" "Would you recommend the course to someone?" And "Why is it common for students to assume that English courses are of little practical value? Why do they assume that they already know all there is to know about language?"

Claire remains consistent in her positive response. She enjoyed working with advertising, especially with the older ads from 30 and 40 years ago. She says she would definitely choose our version of the course over a more traditional approach, which isn't surprising, because she has made it clear all along that the

new material is both interesting and valuable to her. She also says she would recommend the course primarily on the basis of its difference. Because it wasn't the same old English, she says, it woke people up and they took notice. Claire answers my question about the typical attitude towards English courses in an indirect way. She immediately recognizes what I am referring to and describes a "guy upstairs" who takes English courses lightly because he feels that his secretary will write things for him, and her spell check will then take care of whatever she can't handle. For him, English means grammar and spelling, and he has no sense whatsoever of how powerful a thing language is. Claire also speaks about her roommate who couldn't wait to unload her final freshman essay knowing that she would never have to take another English course again, a fact that made her very happy. Although Claire admits to the same feeling about calculus, she says she would never assume, as her roommate seems to do with English, that there is nothing more to learn about calculus. Although Claire has responded positively to the course all along, in this final interview, she sounds more convinced and more enthusiastic than she has all semester. Perhaps by the end of the course she feels comfortable with the approach because by then she has a good grasp of what I have been trying to accomplish. And perhaps my own increasing sense of confidence has become more apparent as the semester progressed. By the end of the course, I am less tentative and uncertain than I was at the start, and my changing demeanor may have influenced students' responses.

Like Claire, Chris finds the final segment of the course on advertising both interesting and enjoyable because he says he never really thought critically of advertising. His assessment of the whole course is, surprisingly, positive: "I think it helped 'cause I figured the English I [took] would just be more writing, but with the language, being introduced to the way we looked at the language has broadened my horizons. 'Cause I never really thought of doing [English] that way." And he says that he found the course beneficial. Given a choice, he says he would probably choose our non-traditional version of the course because he found it more challenging: "See, I think the traditional way is more like high school or first semester college, where the approach you took in our class is more advanced. If you're challenged, I think you'll spend more time and you'll look into the subject more." When I asked "Would you recommend the course?" he said, "yes," but he said that he wouldn't know how to recommend it because students usually want to hear that a course is easy: "You can't really tell someone it's a harder class but it'll accomplish more." Chris also recognizes as valid students' tendency to see little practical value in English courses. He says students feel that way because they have no sense of progression from less difficult to more difficult levels of study in English as they do in math and science. Students view upper level English courses as "just like for fun." Basic instruction in English stops so early, he says, that most students assume there is nothing left to learn, and because they already speak English, this misconception is

reinforced. These responses are a real surprise because I felt sure that Chris would answer differently and prefer a traditional approach instead of our non-traditional one. But I was again proved wrong. So, in the end, both Claire and Chris, despite their very different orientations and attitudes, find something of value in the approach we used.

I'm still in the process of drawing conclusions from the material I collected, but I can offer four at the moment. First, I think that the approach has some value, and that at least it warrants further investigation, perhaps in the form of more narrowly defined, more tightly focused studies. Second, I think that students respond well to challenging material, despite what they say. Third, each student will take from the approach what he or she finds of importance in it at a given moment. For Claire, it enhanced an already existing respect for language. For Chris, it generated an awareness and respect that had been missing before. I'm certain he won't declare an English major, but he might now have more respect for those students who do. Fourth, I saw that what a student gets out of such a course depends on a number of complex factors, some of which I wasn't aware of. They include a student's orientation and attitude certainly. But they also include the kind of literature used, the kind of linguistic insights used (some are obviously easier to grasp than others), and the commitment and enthusiasm of the teacher. All classrooms, traditional or not, contain a very complex interaction that occurs between students, teacher, and texts. In the non-traditional

course, I added a complication to this already complex interaction --one that altered student, teacher, and text. And at the moment, quite frankly, I'm still struggling with what that new interaction implies.