

Didactic and Contextual Aspects of Reading a Text

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Résumé: Si l'on doit enseigner aux élèves à comprendre un texte littéraire qui pose des obstacles importants, il faut encore être en mesure de nommer clairement les attentes liées à cette compréhension. Si l'enseignant limite la compréhension au décodage des mots, des phrases et de l'intrigue principale, c'est à ces tâches minimales que se limiteront la plupart des élèves dans leurs lectures, parce qu'ils réserveront le travail d'inférence pour l'interprétation qui, dans la conception de plusieurs spécialistes, ne vient qu'après la lecture intégrale. Ce que nous proposons dans notre article est l'idée suivante: le sens produit par la compréhension et la signification issue de l'interprétation se nourrissent l'un l'autre, en concomitance, dans une dynamique qui redessine sans cesse la lecture d'un texte.

Mots-clé: compréhension, interprétation, explication, sens, signification.

The teaching tradition has always situated interpretation to a higher level than explanation. In fact, creation needs more skills than understanding the meaning of a text. It uses, among others, the reader's culture, his knowledge and his habits, and certain history or literature notions.

The student must understand very early that the interpretation does not try to use the text as a common ground for some interpretative hypotheses which are not connected to the text, but it is more likely to look for meanings coming from the text itself. In order to avoid some false interpretations, the teacher

must use in his work a set of rules, but he also needs to let the students' imagination to work by itself.

Advanced meanings must be oriented towards explanation (absolutely necessary to comprehension). This way, the teacher has to look for a certain degree of objectivity for his students, leading them away from an interpretation centered on their subjective universe. In order to realize this situation during the class, students must be shown that they can use a great number of social and cultural references, coming from the school environment or not: television, cinema, intertextuality, historic or present references, models connected to characters, events, symbols etc.

But we don't have to limit interpretation only to literary domains. Other types of texts, as documentaries, political or advertising discourses etc. can also be interpreted. Each public discourse carries within itself ideas and intentions which are not obvious, but can be revealed through the correct knowledge and the right mechanisms.

The readers situate themselves in a readers' community (in our case, we are talking about school and students). In this way, comprehension is partly socially conditioned; reading does not represent only *le moment où celle-ci s'effectue, mais un ensemble structuré de pratiques socialement et culturellement réglées et différenciées* (Reuter, 1981: 142), which has a very important role when it comes to reading or interpreting texts.

Explanation is though achieved through unifying the social side with the experience, two mobile parts of comprehension, with multiple layers (linguistic, historic, social, cultural, psychological etc.). The new meaning will depend on a certain consensus: a community of readers will have to recognize the new meaning as being a semantic construct coming from that text.

Interpretation has, in its turn, a social part which makes it available. It is represented by a meaning extracted by the reader in a community. Without discourse, without confrontation with another, interpretation cannot be recognized and it remains a simple personal creation. The person who interprets must reassure

himself that his interpretation overcomes the position of subjective sign in order to become a social sign (which can participate to the semiotic process).

But it is necessary to distinguish between the interpreter's work and the analyst's work (who has to go much further with his explaining). If there are no limits regarding interpretation, this thing happens because it represents the process of creating new meanings, but the analyst has a very different role. He doesn't try to interpret the text, he tries to realize which are/is its meanings/its meaning.

If we were to have as aim optimizing the comprehension, the text which is to be read in class by the students should present a certain rigidity, that means that the signs it contains should create an impediment in explaining the text by the reader. In this situation, understanding is a more difficult process due to a complicated vocabulary or syntax or to a less familiar universe, new ideas, a difficult narrative structure, a conflicting logic or too obscure metaphors etc.

In order to reveal meaning, the reader must overcome the differences that appear between the text and his own referential knowledge. Decoding the non-explicit information is obviously part of this stage of re-organizing because any element which is necessary to understand a text must be adapted to an overall framework which translates a certain general idea. The teacher has a major role in the process of explanation because, the more difficult the text, the more demanding is adapting student's proficiency to the process of learning.

Explaining a text is a process realized through linguistic information, through deep study and an enrichment of contents: the reader uses a word, a phrase as starting point in order to capture the overall sense. Students conceptualize the information from the text, clearing away the details and getting to the reformulation of a text, using a macroscopic view on meaning. This is the only method that can be used for memorizing textual data on long term.

All knowledge necessary to understanding comes from the memory. This is the reason why, in order to help the student in his activity of comprehension, it is important that the teacher orients pupils' knowledge in a structural way. So to say, the reader's knowledge base is the *main agent* in comprehension (according to Irwin and Baker, 1989). In a context of learning like this, the reader visualizes the reading content, makes foresights regarding what is next, compares with what he already knows, evaluates, comments and synthesizes. He tries to understand better, to clear the fragments he does not understand very well or seem to be obscure to him. In order to realize all these, the student uses the text itself, optimizing his understanding and, as a consequence, the memorizing of what is necessary.

In order to arrive at the virtual, hidden content of the text, the reader infers, creates bounds. He uses information which is not obvious, but which is implied in the words and the phrase itself. The mechanism of inference that the explanation needs is, in fact, situated, in a certain way, in the text itself.

Giasson (1990) distinguishes three types of inferences: *logical inferences* whose parts are to be found in the text, *pragmatic inferences*, based on reader's knowledge or stereotypical schemes and *creative inferences*, the most complex of all, which use the greatest amount of preceding knowledge and relevant stereotypical schemes.

When it comes to explanation, good readers always find themselves in the situation of inferring implicit information from the text, that is what the author does not say and the reader must understand by himself. In order to refine his understanding, the reader must be conscious that he needs to go beyond the explicit information of a text in order to truly understand it. If he limited himself to the explicit meaning, the reader would not understand, for example, the double message of irony; inferences are though needed to create a bound between the text and the personal socio-cultural knowledge of the reader so that he could decode irony.

For the pupil who studies a text to be able to understand the inference mechanisms, the teacher must support him with some

enlightening questions (*What hints in the text helped you with this deduction? The information you deducted is important in an overall explanation of the text?*). In this way the student will be able to make the difference between what is indeed explanation and what represents a creative interpretation.

The explanation can be situated on a continuous bipolar axis between a literal explanation and an inferential one which can be told apart only through their degree of complexity. Literal explanation refers to what is present on the surface of the text, in an explicit way, without resorting to the inference mechanisms. Much more complex, inferential explanation relies on more complicated bounds: it helps the reader to understand the default fragments and to complete the missing information. But explanation does not appear in a diachronically manner to the student who has to learn to read any kind of text, using literal and inferential explanation at the same time.

The didactic process does not impose upon the student a unique reading; on the contrary, it allows him to use his interpretative skills too. In this manner, while reading for himself, the student will develop an understanding based on interpretation, which he will enrich while going further with the reading. Once the reading finished, the process of learning will continue in the classroom through the collaboration with the classmates and the teacher.

Conclusions

If the explanation represents the construction of meaning from explicit and implicit elements of the text, then interpretation should be a theory regarding the text's plurality and should have as aim the significance, a choice between all the possible signifiers. If the meaning is partly intrinsic to the text, its significance is extrinsic, being created by the reader-interpreter who tries to produce new signs from the ones he discovers in the text.

The reader, studying a text, will suggest his interpretation: he does not know what it signifies, but what he thinks it signifies; interpretation is seen as the point of view of a subject (the reader)

on an object (the text). But that point of view will never be the only one possible: it will always exist the choice of only one significant of all the possibilities a text develops. The interpreter's point of view is no longer a globalizing one, the way it is in the case of the reader through the process of explanation. This happens because it is impossible to interpret all parts of a text, in the same time. So, the interpreter focuses on elements of peculiar interest to him in order to achieve a significance which does not appear explicitly in the text, but implicitly.

Explanation and interpretation are not two points of view that exclude each other. On the contrary, they are united by Ricoeur in a hermeneutical arch:

“Si au contraire, on tient l'analyse structurale pour une étape – et une étape nécessaire – entre une interprétation naïve et une interprétation critique, entre une interprétation en surface et une interprétation en profondeur, alors il apparaît possible de replacer l'explication et l'interprétation sur un unique arc herméneutique et d'intégrer les attitudes opposées de l'explication et de la compréhension dans une conception globale de la lecture comme reprise du sens” (Ricoeur, 1970: 197).

The distance between the author and the text and between the reader and the world of the text allows us to introduce the theory of interpretation in two stages. These stages are, in fact, as we have already seen, the explanation and the interpretation, two concepts through which textual meaning emerges.

If the explanation deals with *how?*, the interpretation answers the question *why?* So, the first represents the study of an object, independent of any observer (objectivity) while the second is the study of a subject (a person) by another person (subjectivity). The explanation needs “*une mise à distance (distanciation)*”, while interpretation needs “*une appropriation (actualization)*” (Rastier, 1989: 19). The first manipulates signification,

property of de-contextualized signs unlike the second which manipulates sense, property of the signs in a certain context and in a certain situation.

Reorganizing the inherent meaning of explanation is not an action which can be reduced to an unique message that the author tries to transmit: it is not about the person who talks beyond the text, but it is about what is said. We can conclude by saying that the reading of a text builds a number of different worlds and the reader tries to explain meaning, overcoming the existing obstacles or interpreting them through new meanings.

While constructing these possible worlds it is difficult to determine which of the two stages of explanation and interpretation determines the other. Without proposing the idea that “*la compréhension suit l'interprétation*” (Vanderdorpe, 1992: 163), we rather say that they act simultaneously and the reader of a text explores all the possible signs in order to enrich his understanding with the help of new significations which he himself creates and validates in the text. So, the meaning changes continuously in the light of new information. Its consensual character will emerge as a consequence of the integration in the discourse of the following interpretations which tend (after they are being confirmed) to strengthen around certain significations, and so to become the explanation of the text.

We conclude with the following final remark: although we have studied them separately, the explanation and the interpretation are not opposite, they are, on the contrary, inseparable and there cannot exist one without the other; they complete one another and function together as a whole.

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