TRAINING PRIMARY TEACHERS IN POETIC EXPERIENCE

María Teresa Calderón Quindós

Universidad de Valladolid
calderon@fing.uva.es

María Teresa Calderón is a member of the Department of English Studies *at the* University of Valladolid. *She holds a Doctorate in English Studies since 2004 and has done research on 20th century poetry and cognitive stylistics.*

This article -based on practical experience at University- intends to show how students training as Modern Foreign Language Primary Teachers can be helped to understand and appreciate poetry and then use it for teaching purposes at Primary levels. The paper presents the way the subject "Text Analysis" has been redesigned in order to fit the trainee's specific needs. Therefore, attention is paid not only to linguistic and literary aspects, but also to professional necessities, which includes becoming familiar with specific material for children, and the way it can be used in Primary lessons.

In order for Education students to become competent professionals as Primary School teachers, they must be trained in a manifold variety of skills and knowledge. This implies that lessons of any discipline should not give the impression that each subject involves a separate set of contents. Our course "Text Analysis"[i] intends to attend to as many cross-curricular objectives as possible from those involved in English teaching in Spanish Primary schools: studies on mental processing, English language and culture, linguistic approaches to texts, and MFL Primary teaching didactics.

CLASS MATERIAL

The literary material we use for this course involves both adult poetry and children's poetry. Our election of poetry as work material originates from several motivations:

- From a *literary* point of view, this seems to be the most discouraging of the three genres as regards English literature. Studying poetry in a thorough way from a secondary subject facilitates the learning process in the required subject for MFL Education students "English Literature".
- From the *linguistic* point of view, poetry forces students to think about grammar combinations (syntax and morphology), and helps understand the importance of adequate pronunciation and intonation.
- From a *methodological* point of view, children's poems -when properly used in dynamic Primary lessons- encourage children's taste for literature and are useful material for the pupils' approach to English phonology and vocabulary. MFL students should become familiar with poetry –especially children's poetry- as class material.

TARGETS

The three general targets to be achieved by MFL Education students at the end of the course are the following:

- To perform stylistic analyses of short modern-contemporary English poems using traditional and cognitive linguistic analytic tools.
- To read an English poem with the correct intonation and pronunciation.
- To design and carry out an English lesson for Spanish Primary students using poetic material.

THE LECTURER'S AND THE TRAINEE'S ROLES

Poetry tends to provoke many different effects on students. As a matter of fact, only a few students

seem to feel a natural like towards this genre. The lecturer's efforts to make their students work out meaning from particular poems do not guarantee that they will be able to make head or tail of a different one and this is quite discouraging for both. However, if the lecturer merely "helps" the trainee in the process of reading a poem, the trainee him/herself will have to make the intellectual effort and they will also make their own discoveries, which is much more satisfying for both student and lecturer. In order for students to do so, their individual thinking processes need to gradually accommodate to poetic experience, so the set of mental processes have to be encouraged and carefully guided and followed by the lecturer.

The way we actually work in our course allows both attentive guidance and freedom for individual thinking. Our class dynamics is mainly practical. Students work in small groups after (and often before) the teacher's theoretical explanations on exercises designed to prove their understanding and identification capacity. In this way, they gradually improve their theoretical knowledge from practical experience. Later, student's suggestions are discussed with the whole group, and they are asked to hand in a written account of their reflections, which forces them to verbalize their thoughts. At the end of the course, students should apply their competence in reading poetry in the final task: to design a well adapted lesson for Spanish Primary Students using children's material. The lecturer's and trainees' roles in the course can be summarised in the following way:

- Trainees are thinkers, providers of arguments, and creators. Each student is always the protagonist in the teaching-learning process, and not the lecturer.
- The lecturer acts as a guide, suggests tasks, explains steps to be taken, clarifies concepts, and directs and re-directs the students' thinking activity.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES AND MODERN COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES

This 30-hour course being designed for Primary teachers-to-be, it seems essential that they can achieve as many goals as possible in the shortest time, from the literary, linguistic, and professional perspectives. As true learning can only be achieved through active mental processing, it is necessary to look for the quickest and least traumatic way to arrive at full and fertile participation. This implies that students should be provided with some quick, useful analytic tools that will make them feel confident. The most effective ones seem to be those connected with their previous knowledge of literature and of life itself. There are two complementary things we use to facilitate literary analysis: 1) traditional techniques, using their previous knowledge of poetic analytic tools and 2) modern stylistics based on cognitive findings, paying attention to ordinary thought processing. This implies that here we need to make use of both traditional knowledge and recent findings about the way we read a poem.

Using traditional approaches

Poetry being a musical phenomenon, especially as regards children's poetry, it is very important that students develop a sense of poetic rhythm. For most of the students, poetic musicality is easier to recognise when they are given clues from a traditional perspective. Our first lessons usually start with reading aloud of Spanish and English poems, giving students the opportunity to notice the difference between Spanish and English traditional metrics, the first being based on number of syllables per line, the second, on Latin foot. Subsequently, their recent knowledge of traditional English metrics is constantly reinforced through their reading aloud and scanning of the poems to be analysed. We usually start with quite regular poems. Then, as we move on to modernism and post-modernism, students are encouraged to try traditional techniques on free verse, so that they will recognise there is something else that produces rhythm and which cannot be scanned in traditional terms. It is then that students are introduced to post-modern rhythm, based on sentence stress and intonation.

There are also other sound and rhetorical devices that are briefly looked at from the traditional perspective, but they are also considered from a cognitive perspective. This approach will be briefly explained below as it is used in our course lessons.

Using a cognitive perspective[ii]

There are aspects which are specific of poetic discourse –though not exclusive to it-, such as its formal dimension and the fact that it is intrinsically imaginary. However, as cognitive linguistics has proved (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Fauconnier and Turner, 2001), there is no substantial difference in the way our minds proceed when we use language, irrespective of the purpose for which we use it. As has been proved elsewhere (Calderón, 2005), there are many features which make poetry similar to other sorts of discourse, since meaning construction is ruled by the same ordinary cognitive processes. From my own experience, I can say that, when the lecturer is conscious of the universal mental processes the students can activate in order to work out meaning, success is almost always guaranteed. Students need not name what they are doing, but they must become conscious of their mental processing when reading and studying poetry.

1. MENTAL SPACES. One of the basic concepts used in our course is "mental spaces"[iii]. While we are reading a poem, we create mental spaces following the discourse guidelines and our own Long Term Memory knowledge, and we develop as many conscious and unconscious connections between them as we are capable of. Conscious mental space construction can be very quickly and easily taken to practice by telling our students to make rough hand-drawings of absolutely everything that is *explicitly* suggested by the poem, and to make as many connections as they can between elements and/or spaces. This is a very useful task in order for students to pay close attention to grammar and vocabulary, but also for them to watch for every possible relation that might be suggested. The first time they perform this activity, the results tend to be poor and they need help to establish connections: they may be told to organise all the lexical words into different semantic fields, sensory domains, or according to image similarity.

2. MOTOR-SENSORY INFORMATION. According to *experientialist cognitive linguists*, thought and language have their fundamental base in bodily experience (Johnson, 1987). It seems essential to consider experiential information when teaching a second language: the closer the learner can appreciate linguistic experience through his/her own body, the quicker (s)he will organise words into categories and will learn and remember meanings. There exists no discourse that is able to eliminate motor-sensory experience (Johnson, 1987). As poetry is particularly rich in motor-sensory images, we can encourage trainees to appreciate poetry through their senses and to notice how sensory information helps to provoke mental responses in the reader. For instance, they can use Sweetser's (1990) and Ibarretxe Antuñano's (1997) findings on the relation between sensory experience and conceptualisation.

3. CONNECTIONS. In everyday thought, we establish connections between conceptual items -as in conceptual metaphors-, between formal items -as in onomatopoeias-, or between conceptual information and formal information -as happens with the iconicity of language (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In poetry, conceptual connections tend to be of an imaginary nature and are frequently brought up or reinforced by sound. It is important that students be able to suggest association possibilities and give well justified reasons for their suggestions.

4. TROPES. The interesting thing about asking students to make connections is that tropes can be considered in a more modern and global sense. This clearly enriches the reading of the poems. In many cases, the students' old ideas about metaphor and metonymy are not clear enough or too linguistically biased. For instance, students do not usually think that they can extend beyond mere words. The first idea about tropes that I want my students to understand is that they are of a cognitive-conceptual nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), and that some of them are so strongly present in our minds that we are not usually conscious that we use them. Generally, basic metaphors such as TO DIE IS TO SLEEP and TO DIE IS TO LEAVE are only explicit to our students when they are asked for reasons why they think the text mentions someone dying. Being able to find basic metaphors supporting the poems facilitates the student's access to interpretation (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

DEALING WITH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In our course, the transition from adult's to children's poetry occurs quite gradually. Here are the five different ways in which children's poetry is used in our classroom.

I. SOUND ANALYSIS. Children's poetry together with adults' poetry is used to develop the trainee's scanning skills and reconnaissance of other poetic sound devices, even from the very first lessons. Thus, trainees can start noticing formal parallelisms between both sorts of poems.

II. READING PERFORMED ALOUD. At some point in the course, trainees are asked to perform readings of poems aloud and to use some choreography that may help the audience understand the poem. This activity helps students to become conscious of how important it is for a poem to be read with the correct intonation, rhythm, and pronunciation, so that it can be properly appreciated by the audience.

III. COGNITIVE-STYLISTIC ANALYSIS. From a different perspective, trainees can also be asked to perform cognitive-stylistic analyses of children's poems, using the same procedures they used when dealing with adult's poetry. This way, the trainee will recognise that children's poems are not only sound games, but that they also provoke emotions and mental responses in the reader or listener.

IV. PRIMARY LESSON DESIGN. Trainees are asked to design and implement a lesson for Primary students using poetic material. This task requires that trainees be able:

1 To identify poems which fit each group's age, motivations, and language competence.
2 To design activities connected with the poem to be read, adequate to the target group's level, related to each other in a well-defined sequence of implementation, and directed at the children's achievement of well-defined didactic objectives.
3 To use their analytic skills to facilitate Primary students' insights of the poems.

V. CREATIVE WRITING. Trainees can be encouraged to write any kind of poem they feel able to produce. They can also be asked to write their own poems for children and produce some explanation of how they would use them in Primary lessons.

In order to meet the targets in Task 4, trainees must have already developed some specific skills related with English didactics, but also with poetry. The latter skills should have been achieved through their study of adult poetry in the first part of the course. It is important to notice that teachers are not expected to use poetry in Primary lessons in the same way we have been using it in the first part of the course. On the contrary, their already acquired poetic skills should just facilitate the trainee's insight into the poem in order to be able to design well-adapted activities for Primary students. As regards the poem itself, the trainees should be able:

i *To identify the most characteristic features, main idea, or punch of the poem.* Having identified some relevant feature, the trainee will be able to use it as the starting point of a lesson plan. Our trainees, working with McGough's "The Sound Collector" (Patten, 1999: 73), recognised in the poem *The House* as the main cognitive domain suggested, and the use of onomatopoeic words describing domestic sounds. Thereafter, they designed activities based on the house environment to reinforce old vocabulary and pick up the new words that would appear in the poem. They also worked on body language through activities based on mimicry and sound production. Another group of trainees used Wright's "Dave Dirt's Christmas Presents" (Patten, 1999: 32) to talk about the moral suggested. For their lesson, they managed to bring to life the poem's elements: they brought real material to the class and disguised some of their classmates as the poem's characters. While the class were quite unconsciously reinforcing vocabulary and acquiring new one, the trainees led them into a discussion on solidarity and the understanding of other people's actions.
ii *To understand the grammar combinations used in the poem.* Trainees will need to know that grammatical combinations sometimes suffer variations due to metric requirements. Of course, they no not have to work on grammar with some of the ages;

even when pupils have some theoretical notions about grammar, they are not expected to be able to explain syntactic variations. However, it is important that the trainee understands exactly what (s)he is reading to the children, in order to be able to facilitate comprehension by means of paraphrases, gestures and voice modulation.

iii *To understand the meaning and role of each of the words in the poem.* In order to do this, trainees need to pay attention to conceptual and formal connections between the words and their positions in the poem texture. Antithesis, metaphor, metonymy, or synaesthesia should all be identified if present. If the trainee is able to recognise tropes, (s)he will be prepared to help children find connections by themselves, using questions such as: What's the difference between A and B? Why are A and B similar? What does A have to do with B? Identifying metonymy in Patten's "Uncle Ben from Number One" (Patten, 1999: 101) can lead the trainee to design a lesson focused on the chicken's life cycle or on the different ways to cook an egg.

iv *To identify motor-sensory information.* This includes being able to recognise the importance of motor-sensory information to provoke mental responses. Our trainees were conscious of how important *size*, *touch*, and *body movement* are in Wright's "Greedyguts" (Patten, 1999: 26-27), so they made quite good use of body contact (elbowed, squashed) and movement (suggesting actions and size) when performing their reading aloud. They noticed that if the audience is physically involved in the story (by moving and touching), they respond to the poem in a richer way than if they only read or listen.

v *To read each poem with the appropriate intonation and pronunciation.* In order to do this, trainees often need to make use of their scanning abilities, since children's poetic material tends to use traditional metrics to develop the child's musical skills. Correct pronunciation is necessary so as not to provoke long term mispronunciation in children, since wrong forms assimilated in early ages are very difficult to remove. Correct pronunciation is also necessary to encourage phonetic learning through rhyme and other sound devices. Reading aloud of "The Sound Collector" using wrong pronunciation would completely destroy the poet's attempt to reproduce domestic sounds and the poem would be completely incomprehensible to a child's ear. Our trainees paid very careful attention to the sound texture of the poem, which helped the class make ear connections between the noises they were producing in their performances and the phonetics of the text. When working with Wright's "Greedyguts", the students were asked to dramatise the poem while reading it. They quickly recognised the antithetic elements associated with the two main characters, and they used the antithesis in their reading aloud, through voice modulation and well-defined gestures. They also recognised rhythm and were able to keep it all through the reading performance, all of which made the poem attractive, amusing, and easy to remember.

As can be seen, some creative writing has been included at the end of the course. Here, trainees are free to write any kind of poem they want or feel able to produce. The only thing which is required from them is that they use some of the poetic devices previously studied (both from the traditional and cognitive perspectives). This is a very motivating activity for most of them, and the results are really captivating, since many different things can be perceived from each of the students: their dexterity in the application of musical devices, their tendency either to think long and deeply on a matter or just to let themselves go, how they use figurative thought and conceptual connections, and even their individual motivations.

Trainees sometimes choose to write poems for adults, but they often prefer to write their own poems for children. Interestingly, some students accompany their poems with quite extended explanations of how they would use them in a Primary lesson. It is important to notice that the poem writing is not a compulsory task in our course, and the lesson plan some trainees produce is not even a suggested assignment, but most of the students decide to accomplish one or both of these tasks.

THE TRAINEE'S ASSESSMENT

Even though the class dynamics during this course is frequently based on team work and whole group discussion, a method has been designed to assess each student's work and goal accomplishment. The final grade results from the sum of five different aspects or parts, each of them being firstly marked out of 10 points:

Team work (60%)

1 (25%) Pair work essays (class work).
2 (5%) Spontaneous participation in team and whole group discussions.
3 (30%) Lesson design and implementation.

Individual work (40%)

4 (30%) Compulsory individual papers, which can be one or two depending on the learning rhythm of the class.
5 (10%) Creative writing.

CONCLUSION

Trainees should not leave our universities with the sense that subjects –thus, life experiences- are unconnected departments. If this happens, our graduate students may tend to transfer this lack of connection to their own Primary classes and work against integrative education. To avoid this, subjects should be designed in such a way that trainees can practice not only those skills specific to a discipline, but as many as possible of those involved in the whole teaching profession.

Our course "Text Analysis" -which from its title might seem to be focused on the linguistic study of texts- intends to contribute to the MFL Education trainees' integral formation as teachers from the philological perspective, but it also attends to cross-curricular objectives. It moves from considering the use of traditional and contemporary analytic tools in adult poetry to dealing with the use of children's poetry for Primary lessons.

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NOTES

[i] "Text Analysis" is a 3-credit optional course in the MFL Primary Teacher curriculum at the *Faculty of Education and Social Work* of the University of Valladolid (Spain). It has been designed according to the ECTS system (70-75 hours, including lessons, tutorials, pair work, and individual homework).

[ii] Some Cognitive Linguistics works dealing with cognitive poetics are by Lakoff and Turner (1989), Stockwell (2002), Gavins and Steen (2003), and Calderón Quindós (2004, 2005).

[iii] Multidimensional temporary conceptual structures which are construed in a person's mind for operative purposes. See Fauconnier (1997).