Language Skills and Literary Skills: Some Pedagogical Implications of Considering Literature as Language

James Moody
Sultan Qaboos University

Abstract: *In the context of an ongoing debate about the relation of literary study to English language teaching in universities in the Arab world, this paper begins from the assumption that literature is basically a use of language. From this it follows that aspects of linguistics and language—particularly pragmatics and discourse analysis—can profitably be applied to reading and teaching literature, with the result that both students' ability to use the English language and their skills in analyzing literature will improve. Similarities between reading literature and other language skills are examined in terms of the nature of texts as discourse, the identity of the assumed reader, how the authority of a writer is asserted, and the phenomenon of intertextuality. Specific examples of literary and non-literary texts are considered as illustrations. Finally, some suggestions are made for how language and literary skills might be more effectively integrated in degree programs.*

> 'It would be a ludicrous mistake to identify literature as language.' (Obeidat 1997:36)

> 'Great poets can speak to us because they use the modes of thought we all possess.' (Lakoff and Turner 1998; as quoted in Bailey 2003:2)

1. Introduction: background to the debate

For at least 20 years, there has been an on-going and sometimes acrimonious debate in Arab university English departments concerning the relative merits of literature, linguistics and language, the relationships among them and their respective roles in the curriculum, much of it conducted in the pages of the *English Teaching Forum*. In a seminal article, Zughoul (1986) argued that an overemphasis on literature courses meant that students' competence in using English did not develop, partly because of the deviance of literary from everyday language. He urged more study of language in actual use and emphasized the need for linguistics over literature. The gauntlet was taken up by

John (1986), who offered an opposing view that only by studying literature and 'creative' writing can the 'graces of language' be 'imbibed' through exposure to such phenomena as idioms, connotative meaning, semantic relations and complex syntax (19). He argued that an excessive preoccupation with grammar and linguistics can be counterproductive, quoting in support the writings of Ibn Khaldun to the effect that a knowledge of grammatical rules does not necessarily entail competence in using a language (21-2).

John's position received support from Salih (1989), who discussed a questionnaire given to students to address the role of literature in relation to language. He too concluded that language skills develop through studying literature, and provided as evidence students' claims that literature helped them acquire 'native-like competence', promoted their critical facilities, and was more 'enjoyable' than linguistics or language study (26). Although students' opinions seem a dubious way of proving the first two of these claims, Salih addressed an important issue when he considered the accusation that much English literature is prejudicial to Arab culture and against its traditions. He claimed that this is actually an advantage, as it forces students to take a critical stance, which promotes analytical thinking. Support for John's and Salih's position has come more recently from Obeidat (1997), who has recommended more literature courses on the grounds that English literature, provides exposure to 'language at its best' (32) and illustrates how the English linguistic system is used for actual communication. But Obeidat is emphatic about the cleavage between the study of linguistics and language on the one hand and literature on the other. He states unequivocally that to apply linguistics to literature 'is an improper and rather awkward thing' (34).

In a rebuttal of Obeidat, Haggan (1999) makes two major points. First, that it is wrong to lump together language and linguistics in monolithic opposition to literature: language is concerned with skills, linguistics with the content of an academic discipline. Second, a corrective is given to Obeidat's notion of the abstract nature of linguistics and language: the areas of pragmatics, discourse analysis and communicative language teaching are all concerned with language *in use*. Haggan's dichotomy is less between literature and linguistics/language than

between literature/linguistics and language, for both literature and linguistics require a degree of language proficiency before students are able to experience them, and neither literature nor linguistics teachers can be expected to impart this proficiency to students. In attacking the prioritizing of literature, Haggan points out that reading literary works is not the only way students encounter expressive, effective, idiomatic and imaginative uses of English. She concludes with the results of her own questionnaire which show that students' motivation for studying English is more to perfect their language skills and to obtain a good job than to learn about either linguistics or literature. And she observes; '[I]t is a sad fact that too many students graduate [from Arab universities] with a knowledge of transformational grammar and Shakespeare's plays but without having attained the ability to produce well-constructed, error-free sentences in English' (26).

An undercurrent of the tension apparent in these articles, if not the overt debate itself, continues today in Arab universities, as it does elsewhere. Proponents of literature and linguistics often compete for courses required for a degree. Language tends to be left as the Cinderella member of the triumvirate and is often only grudgingly accepted as a necessary 'remedial' activity. Rarely is a serious attempt made to explore or develop connections among these three components. What is missing is a consideration of the situation from the students' point of view; after all, they are expected to undertake work in all three areas, often simultaneously. The fact that literature, language and linguistics courses are grouped together under the umbrella term 'English' implies that they are in some sense related. To ignore potential connections, or to assume that students will somehow pick them up for themselves, seems a pedagogically dubious way of proceeding.

In spite of their different points of view, all these commentators agree on the need for students to engage actively with English *in use.* On the other hand, they are also united in their opinion that linguistics, language and literature are strictly separate academic pursuits. The remainder of this discussion-- by embracing the first of these positions and questioning the second—attempts to bring a new perspective to the debate, through exploring some of the commonalities among these components of most English departments. Suggestions will be

made for how teaching might be made more effective and respond more adequately to Arab communities' needs for graduates in English, through relating the academic subject to practical experience.

2. Literature as language

While *linguistics* is generally accepted to be the systematic study of language forms and functions, and *language* as a subject in the curriculum usually concentrates on the student's *parole* or performance (Crystal 1985:181 and 173 respectively), there is less agreement about a definition of *literature*. In the articles by John, Salih and Obeidat there is an Arnoldian assumption that literature is 'the best that is known or thought' (Abrams 2000:1475). This approach though can divorce literature from the real world and idealize it into a mental abstraction. From a pedagogical perspective, it can have the effect of alienating students and trapping teachers within their own subjectivity. Thus, Searle (1975:320) has concluded that '[l]iterature is the name of a set of [subjective] attitudes we take toward a stretch of discourse, not an internal property of the stretch of discourse'. It is not the formal features of texts but the purposes they serve and the way they are perceived in a speech community that make them literature.

Pratt (1977) offers a thorough critique of what she terms the 'poetic language fallacy', the attempt to define literature as a separate linguistic category and thereby make it autonomous and removed from ordinary life. Similarly, Eagleton (1983:9) claims that what we usually call 'literature' does not really exist, since it is not possible to distinguish any essential characteristics all texts that have been called 'literary' hold in common. Sometimes literature is designated as 'creative writing', which from this perspective seems a misnomer, implying that it is somehow a superior and separate use of language and that other uses are not also creative. All texts can be analyzed and judged according to similar communicative criteria. It is just as valid (and perhaps more basic) a pedagogical undertaking to impart an understanding what makes a newspaper article, an advertisement, a public notice, or a set of minutes 'good' as it is to analyze the features of a 'good' novel, poem or play.

Whatever else literature is or is not, it must be (*contra* Obeidat in the first quotation at the beginning of this discussion) a

use of language. From this it follows that students' own use of language, both receptive and productive skills, can contribute to their study of literature. Butler (2006:17) refers to a 'cline of literariness' in all language use: the fact that most kinds of discourse can be placed along similar scales of features. Qualities traditionally associated with literature such as narrative structure, point of view, figures of speech, implication, and subtext permeate to varying degrees other uses of language too, and they can productively be used to analyze these uses. Thus, literary technique is closely related to and a refinement of ordinary language. This is one implication of the second initial quotation, from Lakoff and Turner. By challenging the assumptions made in the first quotation, it suggests a way forward in integrating the study of language and literature.

But from another perspective, Fish (1973) has attacked the notion that there is such a thing as 'ordinary language' at all. To assume that those features which make a verbal message a work of art will not also be what make it a verbal message, is to trivialize non-literary uses of language. Fish's position suggests that *all* language use is potentially interesting and worthy of study. He reverses the usual concept of literary language as deviation from a norm by proposing that, on the contrary, it is 'literary' language which is the norm and that 'message-bearing' language is something we carve out of it to perform the task of imparting information. Fowler (1977:158) proposes that the distinction academics make between literature and other forms of discourse is part of a 'bourgeois conspiracy' to make literature inaccessible to readers outside a traditional cultural elite. Without embracing such ideas *in toto*, we can accept that the pedagogical implications of considering literature as a use of language involve not just studying literature as language but studying language as literature as well.

There are many possible reasons for teaching English literature at Arab universities: to nurture an aesthetic sensibility, to develop critical thinking, to understand the historical development of a national literature, to gain insights into another culture. But it seems axiomatic that none of these aims can be attained unless students know how to read carefully, actively and critically. This should be a fundamental aim of literary study. One approach to achieving this is to draw upon some linguistic

concepts in the areas of pragmatics and discourse analysis, which are concerned with examining a text not so much to determine *what* it means but to understand *how* it means. The following discussion will show how some of these ways of thinking about language can be relevant to the teaching of literature and suggest how studying literature can be a means to understanding principles underlying all language in use.

2.1. Texts as discourse

Reading is a *process,* not a static *product* (Widdowson 1983). Pedagogically this means that teachers should attend to what happens in the act of reading, not the results of that act (Hunt 1992). Reading a literary text successfully involves basically the same skills required for decoding any text. And similar skills are used in all communication. To consider a text as discourse is to locate it as one element in a communicative event: the message generated by a sender and a receiver cooperating in a context of situation. The prototypal use of language for communication is, of course, conversation (Levinson 1983:284). Thus, reading well is related to talking well. And if we examine what happens when we converse, we may have a clearer notion of the reading process. Readers, like conversationalists, cannot understand what their interlocutor means unless they engage interactively, through making predictions and testing and revising hypotheses.

Myers (1999:42) has succinctly described how participants negotiate conversation: 'When Hearers interpret Speakers, they assume that the Speaker must be thinking about what the Hearer needs next'. In terms of pragmatic theory, the receiver of a message takes it for granted that the sender is following the Maxim of Relevance (Levinson 1983:102). Reading is similarly interactive. But unlike conversationalists, readers are at several removes from the reality of face-to-face contact and must use their imaginations to reconstruct the communicative event.

All texts are mysteries to be solved. At each stage, readers ask questions based on previous information supplied by the writer. They keep reading to find answers. If readers ask the 'wrong' question—that is, one not answered by the subsequent text—then they go back and reformulate it. This can be illustrated in a basic way through the following story, an adaptation of one

of Aesop's fables. (The numbered italicized questions in brackets indicate the reader's interaction with the text.)

<div align="center">The Ant and the Grasshopper</div>

[1. What are the characteristics of these two creatures?]

A grasshopper was singing away one summer's day…

[2. Why is the grasshopper singing? Is everyone singing?]

when an ant came plodding by, bent under the weight of a kernel of corn.

[3. Why is he carrying the corn? How does he feel? What will the grasshopper say to the ant?]

'Why work so hard in this fine warm weather?' the grasshopper called to the ant.

[4. Why does the grasshopper ask this question? What does he want the ant to do? How will the ant reply?]

'I'm storing up food for the winter', the ant replied.

[5. How does the ant feel about the grasshopper? What advice will the ant give him?]

'And I suggest you do the same'.

[6. Why does the ant make this suggestion? How will the grasshopper react to it?]

'Winter!' replied the grasshopper with scorn. 'Who cares about winter! We have more food than we can eat now. We should just relax and enjoy the summer'.

[7. How will the ant react to this advice?]

The ant did not speak and went about his work.

[8. Why does the ant say nothing?]

Then winter came, and soon the grasshopper couldn't find so much as a grain of barley or wheat or corn.

[9. Why can't the grasshopper find anything to eat? What will happen to him now? What will he do?]

He went to the ant to beg for some food, knowing the ant had plenty.

[10. How will the ant react to this request?]

'Friend grasshopper', said the ant, 'you sang while I slaved away and worked all summer long, and you laughed at me besides.

[11. Will the ant give the grasshopper some food? Why or why not?]

Sing now and see what it will bring you'.

[12. What will singing bring the grasshopper? How does he feel now?]

The grasshopper went away, hungry and cold, sadder but wiser.

[13. Why is the grasshopper sadder? Why is he wiser?]
(Adapted from Janssen 1981)

The italicized questions (based on the model of Widdowson, 1979; 1983) show how a reader makes sense of what is said by deconstructing the process through which the writer has produced the text. Such questions, through engaging the reader with the text, reveal the method and motive behind its construction. Active readers consider possible answers to the question of why a writer is communicating particular information at each point in the reading process. If students understand how writers are continually raising and answering questions for a reader, then they might become more alert to the 'mystery' underlying apparently innocent yet subtle texts, for example:

> Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her (Austen 1816; 2003:1)

Why, the active reader might ask, are we given this image of perfection and complacency in the first sentence of a novel if not to have it shaken and tested in the course of the subsequent story? Analysis of the first paragraphs of novels—and sometimes titles (*Great Expectations, A Farewell to Arms*)—can be an effective way of encouraging students to engage initially with a text and to form hypotheses to be tested as reading proceeds.

2.2. The assumed reader

In a communicative event, the sender conceives of a more or less specific receiver-- either an individual, in the case of, say, a personal letter, or else a particular community, as in the readership of a newspaper. The more accurately the sender identifies the receiver(s), the more communicatively effective the message is likely to be. Widdowson (1979:175) sees the writer's concept of the reader as controlling all writing, and reception theory (e.g., Holub 1984) has shown that the role of the reader is central in influencing how a text is read as well as its method of composition. The writer's assumptions about what the reader knows and does not know affect not only the content of what is communicated but its structure, style and (in some cases, such as multilingual speech communities) the choice of language itself. Literature too is governed by this principle; writers (even great ones) do not write 'for the ages' but for a limited community of readers.

But the purpose of literary education need not be to make students into the readers assumed by the writer. On the contrary, students of English literature in the Arab world may need to understand that virtually none of the works they read are intended specifically for them. This does not, of course, imply that they should not be reading them. For all avid readers, most of what is read has not been intended for them. Indeed, this fact is, more often than not, a source of interest. In such a situation, readers become similar to eavesdroppers on a conversation in which they are not participants. Another example would be an Arabic speaker reading an English language newspaper in the Gulf. Why should first-language Arabic speakers bother to read the news in English when it is more readily accessible in Arabic? One answer is that they can learn something about how English speaking expatriates

are 'talking to' each other: what national matters concern them and why, and their attitudes and opinions about current events.

It can be fascinating to listen in on other people's conversation, in which meaning is not explicitly stated, and try to make sense of it from the clues given, a situation that has been exploited by modern dramatists such as Becket, Pinter, and Albee. But in order to do this at all readers need to understand their position in relation to the discourse taking place. This is relatively clear for spectators at a play or for eavesdroppers on an actual conversation. In academic work, however, the phenomenon is less straightforward. University students, for example, often make misjudgments and waste time trying to comprehend what has not been intended for them to read (such as specialized academic texts). Sometimes even after repeated readings they are still frustrated. They fail to appreciate that the problem lies not so much in their lack of traditional reading skills but, rather, in a failure to assess accurately the writer-reader relationship.

The point of reading literature in English is not, then, for Arab students to try to take on the identity of the readers the writers assumed, but, rather, to understand how discourse is conducted between foreigners. Both Salih (1989) and Obeidat (1997) defend the teaching of English literature against the accusation that it is culturally unsuitable for Arab universities and antithetical to social and moral norms. Such charges are possibly based on the notion that students are trying to read these texts as if they were the intended audience whose attitudes towards Christianity and sexual relations (perhaps the areas of primary concern) are conditioned, along with those of the writer, by their (western) society and culture. From this perspective, the danger is that Arab readers, in taking on a new identity, will begin to embrace such views in order to comprehend what they are reading. They are casting themselves in the role of conversational participants rather than remaining eavesdroppers. If, on the other hand, they approach the work more in the spirit of, say, an historian consulting a document to understand how people communicated in a society different from their own, then they will be less likely to be indoctrinated by foreign values and will also have a clearer perception of one aspect of language as communication.

To be effective, then, Arab-speaking readers of English literature may need to maintain a dual role, by participating in what may appear to be two contradictory activities. First, as in any reading situation, they should be actively engaged with a text through questioning, asking, affirming, doubting, in all the ways that conversational interlocutors normally communicate. But at another level, they need also to step back and recognize that they are *not* the kinds of readers these writers are 'conversing' with, and therefore they may not share the same information, values or assumptions. For this reason, a certain amount of background knowledge may be required as an aid to comprehending the text, but readers should try to maintain a distinction between, on the one hand, identifying the assumed readers and, on the other, trying to take on this identity themselves.

The role of the reader is also crucial in another way. In addition to being able to assess their relationship to the real writer, readers must also learn to play the literary game, through what Coleridge (1817, in Abrams 2000:478) called 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. Authors of fiction and poems manipulate the communicative event by assuming identities for both sender and receiver different from those of the actual participants. This view is implied in Beardsley's (1973) definition of literature as an imitation illocutionary act. Literature, in contrast to other uses of language, is supposed to set up its own context and-- by addressing readers *as if* they already knew the identity of the imaginary sender, receiver, setting and situation—to require them to use clues in the text, to identify these features of the context. The use of deictic expressions in the first lines of literary works is an obvious example, as in the famous injunction at the beginning of *Moby Dick*, 'Call me Ismael' (Melville 1851; 2000). Or in Yeats' poem: 'That is no country for old men' (1927). Part of the writers' strategies in these cases is to force readers to use the subsequent text to identify the references of *me* and *that*.

But literature is not the only kind of communication that invites such mental processing. Most of us have experienced conversations in which our interlocutors, under the mistaken notion that we are familiar with them, refer to people or places unknown to us. To make sense of what is being said when a conversation 'misfires' in this way, we undertake a similar kind of imaginative construction of meaning based on information that *is*

given. The difference is that in literature the writer intentionally plants the information to encourage us to work at retrieving meaning.

   The lyrics of many popular songs illustrate this phenomenon, for example:

> Even on a day like this when you're crawling on the floor
> Reaching for the 'phone to ring anyone who knows you anymore
> It's all right to make mistakes, you're only human
> Inside everybody's hiding something
> Staring at the same four walls, have you tried to help yourself
> The rings around your eyes they don't hide that you need to get some rest….   (Dido, 'Slide' [n.d.])

The real receiver here is cast in the role of a third party overhearing what one person is saying to another. From the information supplied, the identity and state of mind of the person addressed are constructed in the receiver's imagination. Following the Maxim of Relevance, we wonder why the addressee is crawling on the floor, doesn't have many friends, is hiding something, staring at the walls, has rings around his/her eyes. Beardsley (1973) also claims that literature contains an above normal ratio of implicit to explicit meaning. But this turns out to be a questionable assertion if we exclude conversation and popular songs from the category of literature.

   Other kinds of nonliterary writing are imitation illocutionary acts too. Advertisements such as the following make assumptions about a receiver, who may not be the real reader:

> CHILDREN'S CLOTHES LIKE SANDPAPER? (for a detergent)

> TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT TOILET HYGIENE (for a toilet cleaner)

> BE A MAN! OWN YOUR OWN HOUSE (for a real estate agent)

> LOOK YEARS YOUNGER WITH INECTO (for a hair dye)

> PROVE IT. DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES? (for a business training program)

> JOIN HANDS WITH US AND ADVANCE YOUR
> BUSINESS (for a publishing company)

As readers decode these slogans, they are likely to find that they are not the intended addressees, but they suspend disbelief to play the roles in which they have been cast. Texts like these can create problems for the unsophisticated reader. Great works of literature have been said to possess the power to affect our lives. A similar process at a more mundane level occurs in negotiating these texts. Prior to reading them, mothers may not have been unduly concerned about their children's scratchy clothes, housewives about the cleanliness of their toilets, husbands about their manliness, the elderly about their graying hair, business people about their or their companies' effectiveness. But in assuming their roles as readers, they may begin to worry about such issues.

2.3. The authority of the writer

The question of authorial authority is important in all writing since the identity of who is addressing us is less obvious than in conversation. Many kinds of texts commonly report not just a writer's own views or observations but what other people have said. Academic writing is one conspicuous example, as the number of in-text citations and end references shows. Newspapers are another. Uncritical readers may take newspapers to be transparent reports by journalists of what has happened, but news is often a fusion of various sources. Consider the following report (slightly abridged) from the Doha *Peninsula* (24 January 2007):

<div align="center">BRIDGE HIATUS: UN TELLS IRAQ</div>

(1) A UN envoy said yesterday that Iraq was sliding 'into the abyss of sectarianism' and urged Iraqi political and religious leaders to halt the violence.

(2) UN envoy Ashaf Qazi condemned the attacks and called on leaders to 'save the country from … sectarianism'. 'These deplorable outrages again underscore the urgent need for all Iraqis to reject violence and together choose the path of peace and reconciliation', Qazi said.

(3) The US military said Iraqi and US troops were taking a 'balanced approach' in attacking Shi'ite and Sunni Arab militant groups—apparently responding to charges… that [the] government has failed to crack down on Shi'ite militias.

(4) Some 600 members of radical young Shi'ite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr's Mehdi Army are in custody, the military said. A US military statement said that in the past 45 days, 52 raids had targeted the Mehdi Army, and 42 were focused on Sunni Arab insurgents….

(5) Maliki has vowed to tackle all illegal groups, regardless of sect, in the new crackdown… which Shi'ite allies say may be the last chance to avert a collapse of the new state brought about by the US invasion of 2003.

(6) Al Qaeda deputy leader Ayman Al Zawahiri mocked US President George W. Bush's plan to send more troops, saying militants could wipe out the entire US army, according to an Internet video posted on Monday. 'Why not send 50 or 100,000? Aren't you aware that the dogs of Iraq are pining for your troops' dead bodies?' he said.

(7) The US statement said US-backed Iraqi forces had detained 16 high level Mehdi Army militiamen in recent operations.

Now when we analyze this (not untypical) example of news reporting, we see that each paragraph presents the point of view of someone other than the writer, who is completely effaced:

> Paragraphs (1) and (2): UN
> Paragraphs (3) and (4): US military
> Paragraph (5): Maliki/ senior Shi'ite allies
> Paragraph (6): Al Qaeda deputy leader
> Paragraph (7): US military

In fact, a major task of readers here is to follow these shifting perspectives and to reach a synthesis on their own. Literary writers manipulate points of view in similar ways, often to achieve ironic effects—as at the end of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where the tragic events of the story are reinterpreted from the perspective of an insensitive and unaware colonial official. More complex uses of multiple points of view that report a single set of circumstances are basic to the entire structure of

such otherwise diverse works as Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* (1957-60) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997).

In the BRIDGE HIATUS report attributions are clearly made, but often in newspapers authorial authority is ambiguous, as in the following, also from the *Peninsula* (3 April 2006):

> 'Qatargas 3 and Qatargas 4 will be shipping most of their volumes to the US markets…', the Minister said.

> Qatargas 3 is an integrated project, jointly owned by QP (68.5 per cent), ConocoPhillips (30 per cent) and Mitsui (1.5 per cent).

In decoding these two paragraphs the reader has no way of knowing whether the information in the second one is a continuation in reported speech of what the minister said, or given on the authority of the writer (journalist), or from another unacknowledged source such as a press release. A similar complexity in perceiving the authority on which information is reported is presented in two recent English novels, *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood (2000) and *Atonement* by Ian Mc Ewan (2001), where the narrative impact depends on the fact that most the novel itself turns out to be not the report of an omniscient narrator but, rather, a story written by one of the characters.

News reports also rarely present what has happened in chronological order, a practice which foregrounds the presence and authority of the writer. Journalists are taught to 'lead' with what they want the reader to perceive as the most important aspect of the story, which is often its outcome or result. But what is crucial here is that it is the writer's selection and arrangement of information that determines the main idea, not a pre-existing reality. In the BRIDGE HIATUS report, information is packaged for the reader so that the UN's perspective is emphasized. And if we consider the first two paragraphs as marking the main time of the story, we have no way of knowing whether the reports in subsequent paragraphs were given before, after or simultaneously with the main time. It is the mediation of the writer-- who arranges events and omits markers of time-- that causes this confusion. Many novels manipulate the time scheme by beginning with the outcome of a story and then going back into the past. A

striking example is Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950), which starts with an account of a murder and then proceeds to examine how and why it occurred. At the end, the reader understands how inadequate the original report has been as an explanation of what really happened, because the writer has exercised authority over the narrative.

That literary writers commonly employ such techniques—mixed points of view, ambiguous attribution of sources, and use of non-chronological order—is nothing new. But what, perhaps, has been insufficiently acknowledged is that these are not the inventions of modernist authors but are to be found in such ordinary uses of language as newspapers. They are less exclusively literary devices than features of common communication. What literary writers have done (like their twentieth century counterparts in the visual arts) has been to take elements from the everyday world around them and to extend and exploit them. Even first-language English readers have found the fiction of high modernism difficult or impenetrable. But if in reading even such a complex narrative as, for example, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)-- which employs each of these methods-- students can grasp that what they are expected to do as readers is basically similar to how they decode a newspaper report, then the task of the literature teacher will be easier.

2.4. Intertextuality

All uses of language relate to other uses, and no real use exists independently. Not only are all texts parasitic on previous communicative events, but understanding the connections among them is also necessary for the top-down processing of meaning. Literature is no exception to this principle, as much of the previous discussion has suggested. This fact led Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964:244) to point out some time ago that '[l]iterature is literature only against the background of language as a whole'. This observation can be expanded by distinguishing two types of what has come to be known as *intertextuality* (e.g., Fowler 1981) in literary works.

First, in *direct* (or 'literary') intertextuality, writers sometimes assume their readers are familiar with other literary texts. For example, novels have used events from other novels presented from the contrasting point of view of a character in the

original text : Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966): Mrs. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*; Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005): Penelope in *The Odyssey*; John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000): characters in *Hamlet*. Or the structure may echo other texts, as in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Also, the reader's comprehension may depend on recognizing specific quotations (Eliot's *The Waste Land,* 1922). Readers' knowledge of classical and biblical myths, of course, has been presumed by writers throughout the history of literature in English. If readers lack such familiarity (as is increasingly the case even in first-language English speaking communities), then they miss part of the literary experience. This is more important in some cases than in others: it is possible to comprehend *The Grapes of Wrath* without knowing the *Book of Exodus*. But sometimes (as with Eliot's poem), considerable effort may need to be made to understand the intertextual references. In fact, Eliot himself felt the need to add notes on The *Waste Land* (perhaps because he realized that his assumed reader did not exist—an interesting case of a writer breaking the communicative contract with his readers).

But more frequently—and inevitably—than direct intertextuality, literature incorporates references to non-literary communication. An understanding of this *indirect* intertextuality is even more basic to understanding. Acquiring a wide- ranging knowledge of how language is used, then, becomes crucial in literary education. Labov (1972) has shown how stories, written or spoken, are structured in similar ways, regardless of whether or not they are perceived as 'literary'. Another example is the novel form itself, which is parasitic on other kinds of writing. Watt (1957), for example, has observed how early English novels were written as a series of letters to and from the characters, as in Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). Thus, a familiarity with personal letters is required to understand these texts. Novels from all periods masquerade as biography: Patrick White's *The Vivesector* (1968); autobiography: Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861); memoir: Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997); history: Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869); confession: Camus' *The Stranger* (1942); streams of consciousness: Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and monologue on a psychiatrist's couch: Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969).   Poems too can be

intertextually related to prayer: Keats' 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness…' (1820); or love letters, with which they share a tendency to hyperbole: Shakespeare's 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?/ Thou art more lovely and more temperate' (1609). Poems have also echoed the language of advertisements, as in Robert Frost's 'Design' (1936), in which the spider about to jump on its prey is 'set ready to begin the morning right'—a phrase associated with a breakfast cereal.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have explored how commonly used metaphors in the ordinary, conventional language we speak structure and organize our experience. They distinguish between superordinate *conceptual metaphors* and their realizations as *linguistic metaphors*. Some examples of conceptual metaphors are More is Up, Less is Down, Life is a Journey, and Misfortune is a Visitor. These are realized as linguistic metaphors in colloquial speech; for instance, 'I'm looking for a change in direction' is a realization of Life is a Journey. The beginning of a popular song refers to Misfortune is a Visitor: 'Hello Mr. Heartache I've been expecting you…' (The Dixie Chicks 1999). Bailey (2003) has proposed that, from the point of view of cognitive linguistics, this notion of metaphor challenges the basis of the assumption that there is a difference between literal and figurative language. He recommends that students of language acquire a 'metaphorical competence' in the development of productive and receptive skills and that collocational strings of ordinary language be examined and taught to this end.

Bailey is not directly concerned with the study of literature because metaphor and figurative language have in the past been generally associated with literary expression, and he wishes to show that they permeate all uses of language. But in terms of indirect intertextuality, metaphorical competence seems to be a prerequisite for decoding much poetry. Poems about death often make use of the conceptual metaphor Life is a Journey, as in:

> Home is the sailor, home from the sea;
> And the hunter home from the hill.
> (R. L. Stevenson, 'Requiem' 1887),

or in 'Up-Hill' (Christina Rossetti, 1858, as referenced in Bailey 2003) which begins:

> Does the road wind uphill all the way?
> Yes, to the very end.

> Will the day's journey take the whole day long?
> From morn to night, my friend.

A reader of these poems needs first to recognize the conceptual metaphor lying behind them in order to go on to analyze how the poets have exploited it.

Misfortune is a Visitor is the conceptual metaphor generating the anonymous ballad 'The Demon Lover', beginning

> 'Oh, where have you been my long, long love,
> this seven years and more?'
> 'Oh, I've come to seek my former vows
> ye granted me before.'

More than one conceptual metaphor may be realized in a single poem. Emily Dickinson, for example, combines Life is a Journey and Misfortune is a Visitor in:

> Because I could not stop for Death,
> He kindly stopped for me.
> The carriage held but just ourselves
> And immortality.
>
> We slowly drove, he knew no haste
> And I had put away
> My labor and my leisure too,
> For his civility….
> (first published 1924)

Dickinson is original not only in combining two conceptual metaphors but also in presenting Death not as misfortune in the guise of a threatening visitor (as in 'Hello Mr. Heartache' or 'The Demon Lover') but, rather, as a considerate friend. These are factors in evaluating the quality of the poem: a new resonance is given to what might otherwise be clichéd uses of metaphor. Examples such as this one suggest that a claim can be made for judging the best literature as more valuable (or more interesting) than other types of texts, *not* because it is developing new modes of expression but because it is using old modes in new and creative combinations.

Another manifestation of how indirect intertextuality functions is suggested in the work of Bakhtin (1981), who is concerned with the 'dialogic' nature of literature. Texts address their readers in a variety of different 'voices' in dynamic

interaction. This view is similar to Eco's (1979:7) formulation of an 'ensemble of codes' in a literary text. In mixing codes, contrasting uses of language produce a 'polyphony' (Bakhtin) from which the reader reaches a synthesis. It follows then, that unless readers are able to distinguish these codes by identifying them with language use they have actually experienced, then they fail to comprehend the full meaning. In *The Waste Land*, for instance, in addition to direct (or literary) intertextuality, the reader needs to be able distinguish the language of solemn pronouncements ('I will show you fear in a handful of dust'); colloquialisms ('Madame Sosostris… with a wicked pack of cards…'); formal speech ('Do you remember nothing?', in contrast to the more usual 'Don't you remember anything?'); popular songs ('It's so elegant/ So intelligent'); demotic speech ('It's them pills I took…'). Identifying these various voices is possible only if a reader is familiar with the ways language is used in the world outside literature.

3. Suggestions for teaching strategies

The previous discussion has implications for teaching both literature and language. These relate to text selection, methodology and assessment.

3.1. Text selection

Syllabuses might be designed to include an eclectic mix of reading materials. Literary texts have a place in reading skills courses, and non-literary texts have a role to play in literature courses. Students often experience a sense of alienation or frustration when initially confronted with literature in English. Understanding connections between literary and non-literary language can help them overcome this feeling. Figurative language, for example, is not exclusive to poetry; newspapers headlines can offer plenty of examples. Neither is syntactic variation; advertising texts do this too: for example, as in a comparison of 'Coke is it!' with the more ordinary form 'It is Coke!'. Brand names contain implied meaning and allusion: Pepsi Cola, Pearl washing powder, Jif and Ajax cleansers.

Thus, it may be more communicatively appropriate to organize literature courses less around periods or genres than to consider together literary and non-literary texts using similar language

forms and techniques and to choose texts on the basis of what they illustrate as discourse. Students need to be placed in a position in which it is they, not the teacher or the textbook, who classify a text as well or poorly written, or, if the distinction is to be made, as belonging to the category of literature or not. Teachers should be prepared to deal with what they might consider badly written texts as well as with good ones. Students develop a critical sensibility through seeing precisely why and how one character is more rounded than another, one plot is better organized, one use of language is more interesting, or one theme more subtly developed.

3.2. Methodology

Any teaching methodology should be based on the condition of students: what they are familiar with, what they already know how to do, and what skills they lack. Teachers might initially assess this ability through a questionnaire concerning their reading habits (Moody 2007) and/or a diagnostic test to determine reactions to texts. The latter can involve placing side by side two texts of contrasting quality on a similar theme or topic and asking which one students prefer and why. The teacher may despair that students have never read a novel in English; they may prefer Barbara Cartland to Charlotte Bronte; they may love Harry Potter; or their favorite author may be Agatha Christie. The teacher may deem these facts regrettable, but they need to be taken into account in the classroom.

A literature methodology should concentrate on the reading *process*. Hunt (1992) reports on an exercise constructed to develop 'reading fluency', in which a short piece of fiction was broken up into a number of segments. These were then presented one at a time and students were asked to give a reaction to each before proceeding to the next (similar to the questions in 'The Ant and the Grasshopper' above). Students of literature should acquire the ability to construct meaning from clues in a text. In Chapter 8 of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) one group of students did not understand how the reader can conclude from the following that Gatsby has been killed in his swimming pool. After all, the writer, they claimed, never *tells* the reader this directly.

> With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to

disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing like the leg of a compass, their red circle in the water.

A fluent reader is one who understands, from the references to *the laden mattress, its accidental burden,* and *their red circle in the water* that a murder has indeed occurred, by asking why these words have been chosen.

3.3 Assessment

There are two reasons for assessment: to find out how students are progressing and to determine what they have learned. In the former case, the teacher's role is to provide feedback about students' engagement in the reading process. Students need to make errors in order to learn. The teacher needs to develop means of testing which identify as precisely as possible the kinds of reading errors being made. Instruments for assessment might include making predictions from sections of a text, writing about the same events or ideas from another point of view, or comparing a literary text with another kind of language use in some of the ways suggested in the previous discussion. In such exercises, of course, answers are not to be judged 'right' or 'wrong' but, rather, on the basis of how well evidence from the text is used to support an opinion or interpretation.

In the case of terminal examinations too, skills should have priority over knowledge or memory. It may be less important for a student to recall what happened in a story, or what someone else (the teacher or a critic) has said about it than to demonstrate how the experience of reading it has developed their literary skills. This is best done through requiring students to analyze new texts. One possibility is to give a previously unseen piece of writing by an author who has been studied and ask who wrote it and what factors in the text have led to this conclusion.

4. Conclusion

This discussion has attempted to make the case that in reading literature students develop skills they also employ in processing other uses of language. The distinctions among the experiences of reading different kinds of texts may lie in degree and complexity but never in kind. The abilities to comprehend and assess conventions and to analyze and judge apply to *all* instances of

language in use, not only to literature. We do not meaningfully discriminate between effective uses of language by assuming that one variety is, *sui generi*s, superior to another. It is possible to have a well or poorly formed advertisement, newspaper report, public notice, official document or conversation, just as it is to have a good or a bad novel or poem or play. But it is surely fallacious to assume that, say, poems in themselves are 'better' than advertisements. In judging the quality of texts, we apply the same criteria across the spectrum of language use. The struggling student reader no less than the accomplished author are engaged in putting linguistic principles into practice in order to ensure effective communication.

The perception among teachers that students' low level of competence in language prevents them from mastering either linguistics or literature in Arab universities, as referred to in the first section of this article, does not seem to have changed much since the 1980s and '90s. There is still a gap between what students think they are doing and what teachers want them to do. The results of a recent informal survey of student attitudes at the University of Qatar produced results similar to those of Haggan (1999). Most students majoring in English in said that they are doing so to improve their use of the language in order to secure jobs in such fields as journalism, banking, public relations, translation and diplomacy. (Teaching English is rarely mentioned, and becoming a linguist or literary critic or scholar almost never.)

Haggan is, of course, correct to point out that English departments should never be directly engaged in ESP or vocational training. But what impedes students' development of language skills is not whether they are taking more linguistics than literature courses or vice versa. Rather, exploring the interconnections between linguistics and literature with an awareness that both involve the study of how language is actually used for communication can help to improve language skills and make the study of English more responsive to what students need and to what society expects of English graduates. The present discussion began with the idea of language as the Cinderella subject in English departments in the Arab world. However, as a result of a consideration of some of the underlying principles uniting the study of language and the study of literature, the analogy might be revised so that Language comes to be seen more

in the role of a Fairy Godmother, opening the way for what are still separate components of an English degree, to become more fruitfully integrated.

Note: Unless quoted in the article, the numerous literary and other texts mentioned as examples are not cited in the references below.

References

Abrams, M. H., ed. (2000). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, seventh edition. New York: W.W.W. Norton & Co.

Austen, Jane. (1816; 2003). *Emma.* New York: Penguin Classics.

Bailey, Richard (2003). 'Conceptual metaphor, language, literature and pedagogy'. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 1/2. <http://www.Shakespeare.uk.net/journal/jlearn/1_2bailey.html> Accessed 03/12/2006.

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Beardsley, Monroe (1973). *Literary Theory and Structure*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Butler, Ian (2006). 'A brighter future? integrating language and literature for first-year university students'. In Amos Paran (ed.), *Literature in Language Teaching and Learning*, 11-25. Alexandria, VA: Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

Coleridge, Samuel T. (1817). *Biographia Literaria*. Chapter 14. In M. H. Abrams (ed.): 478–83.

Crystal, David (1985). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Dickinson, Emily. (1924). 'Because I could not stop for Death'. <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/stop.html>

Dido [sic] (n.d.). 'Slide', <www.euronet.nl/marbak/rollo/dlyr_slide.htm> Accessed 10/02/2007.

The Dixie Chicks. (1999). 'Hello Mr. Heartache'. *Fly* [C.D.]. <www.lyrics4all.net/d/dixie-chicks/fly/hello-mr-heartache.php Accessed 24/05/2007.

Eagleton, Terry (1983). *Literary Theory: an Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Eco, Umberto (1979). *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts.* London: Indiana University Press.

Fish, Stanley E. (1973). 'How ordinary is ordinary language?'. *New Literary History*, 5/1: 41–54.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1925; 2007). *The Great Gatsby*.
<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f_scott/gatsby/>

Fowler, Roger (1977). 'The referential code and narrative authority'. *Language and Style,* 10/3: 129–66.

Fowler, Roger (1981). *Literature as Social Discourse: the Practice of Literary Criticism.* London: B.T. Batsford.

Frost, Robert. (1936). 'Design'.
<http://www.starve.org/teaching/intro-poetry/design.html>

Haggan, Madeline (1999). 'A linguist's view: the English department revisited'. *English Teaching Forum,* 37/1: 22–29.

Halliday, Michael A.K., Angus McIntosh and Peter Strevens (1964). *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching.* London: Longmans.

Holub, Robert C. (1984). *Reception Theory: a Critical Introduction*. London: Methuen.

Hunt, Russell A. (1992). 'What happens when our students read and what can we do about it?'. In John R. Hayes, Richard E. Young, Michele L. Matchett, Maggie McCaffrey, Cynthia Cochran & Thomas Hadjuk (eds.), *Reading Empirical Research Studies: the Rhetoric of Research*, 43-73. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Janssen, Arlo T. (1981). *International Stories*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

John, Joseph (1986). 'Language versus literature in university English departments'. *English Teaching Forum,* 24/4: 18-22.

Keats, John. (1819; 2003). 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. *Representative Poetry Online*.
<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem1129.html>.

Labov, William (1972), *Language in the Inner City*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George and Mark Turner (1989*). More than Cool Reason: a Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Levinson, Steven C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Melville, Herman. (1851; 2000). *Moby Dick*. New York: Modern Classics.

Moody, James (2007). 'An investigation into the reading habits of Qatar University students', *Qatar TESOL News,* 2/2: 3-8.

Myers, Greg (1999). 'Interaction in writing: principles and problems'. In Christopher Candlin & Ken Hyland (eds.), *Writing: Texts, Processes and Practices,* 40-61. London and New York: Longman.

Obeidat, Marwan M. (1997). 'Language vs. literature in English departments in the Arab world'. *English Teaching Forum,* 35/1: 30-36.

The Peninsula, Doha. 3 April 2006, 24 January 2007.

Pratt, Mary L. (1977). *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Salih, Mahmud H. (1989). 'From language to literature in English departments'. *English Teaching Forum,* 27/2: 25-28.

Searle, John (1975). 'The logical status of fictional discourse'. *New Literary History,* 6/2: 319-32.

Shakespeare, William. (1609). 'Sonnet XVIII'.
<http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/xviiicomm.htm>

Stevenson, R.L. (1887). 'Requiem'.
<http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/StevensonRequiem. htm>

Watt, Ian (1957). *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Widdowson, Henry G. (1979). *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Widdowson, Henry G. (1983), *Learning Purpose and Language Use*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yeats, W. B. (1927). 'Sailing to Byzantium'. <http://www.online-literature.com/yeats/781/>

Zughoul, Mohammad R. (1986). 'English departments in third world universities: language, linguistics or literature?'. *English Teaching Forum,* 24/4: 10-17.