The value of story interpretation for EFL students

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In EFL work with literature and in extensive reading, the question of whether students value the literary reading experience is important, e.g., with reference to motivation. Research with NSs suggests that figurative language is a central aspect of what makes people value literature, and the research reported below investigates whether the same holds true for EFL students. This research focuses specifically on the role of metaphorical language. Research with NSs suggests that relatively challenging metaphors in literature tend to be valued highly because they tend to be rich in meaning. The two studies below investigate whether this is also true for EFL students.

　英語で書かれているストーリーは、読む価値があるという判断がどこから来ているのか。L1読書研究では、その判断がストーリーの比喩的表現の使い方で大きく影響されることがわかっている。本研究は、L2読書でもそのような影響があると分析した。

Research into the question of what language learners value is common in the EFL literature. Recent examples include research on Japanese EFL students' perceptions of a good English class (Biddle, 2005; Tani-Fukuchi, 2005). The research in the present paper is in this tradition. Specifically it focuses on the EFL reading experience, and on how Japanese EFL students feel about the experience of interpreting literary language. This research should be of interest to teachers and researchers working in the areas of extensive reading and work with literature (WWL) in EFL.

The value of the student experience is of central concern in extensive reading and WWL. In WWL, it is common to argue that authentic literary texts are valuable and motivating materials for students. Carter and Long (1991) relate this to the value of literary language when they suggest that literature puts students "in touch with some of the more subtle and varied creative uses of language" (p. 2). In extensive reading, value is related to motivation. This idea is reflected in Day and Bamford's (1998) "bookstrapping hypothesis":

When students discover that they can read in a foreign language and that it is enjoyable to do so, this will increase their motivation to continue reading and "feed back into subsequent extensive reading experiences and assignments" (p. 30). Bassett (2005) also suggests that this kind of virtuous cycle can only occur if the stories that the students read are well-written ones. Thus, in both cases, the value of good writing from an EFL student's point of view is a key concern.

The question of what makes writing valuable is a broad one, but literature-related research in this area has focused on the role of figurative language: the salient patterning of sound (rhyme, alliteration) or salient deviations in meaning (notably metaphor). Van Peer (1986), for example, investigated these things in an empirical study of the experience of reading poetry. The research in the present paper is concerned specifically with metaphor, and with EFL students' evaluations of simple and challenging metaphors in short stories. It is demanding to read literature in a foreign language, and for this reason, one might expect EFL students to have a preference for comparatively simple metaphors. However, research with NSs suggests that the opposite may be the case: NSs tend to evaluate challenging metaphors highly for their literary qualities (e.g., Steen, 1994). In the present paper, the relationship between interpretative challenge and evaluation is investigated in two studies involving students of English at a university in Japan.

Background

Value is a key concept in WWL. Carter and Long (1991) propose three value-related reasons for WWL. One of these is the value of literary language and of giving students the experience of reading "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed" (Carter & Long, p. 2). In Carter and Long's two other models, literature is taught for its cultural value or for its value as a means of contributing to students' personal growth. Others emphasize the psycholinguistic value of WWL. Widdowson (1975), in particular, argues strongly for the position that WWL can help language learners to develop their interpretative skills, because the interpretation of literature is challenging and this provides opportunities to stretch and develop one's interpretative abilities. A similar argument is found in Lazar (1993).

The theoretical arguments for the value of WWL are often sophisticated and persuasive, but it is legitimate to ask what EFL students feel about this work. The findings from survey research are not encouraging. In a survey of 150 Turkish secondary school students, Akyel and Yalcin (1990) found that a majority viewed the literary texts they had to read as "'too long', 'boring', and 'too hard'" (p. 176). Edmondson (1997) surveyed 143 incoming German applied linguistics students to find out what had had a positive or negative influence on their experiences as language learners. Only six students mentioned literature, and only one student called it a positive influence. In a survey of an unspecified number of 2nd-and 3rd-year Hong Kong Chinese students on a university English degree course, Hirvela and Boyle (1988) found that the students often felt anxious about studying literary texts, and no less than 41% of the students chose interpretation as an aspect of WWL "causing particular trouble" (p. 180).

The value of the reading experience is also a key concern in extensive reading. The texts used in extensive reading programmes may often be simplified, but they still need to

give students a valuable, authentic kind of reading experience that will give them the motivation to keep on reading: As Bassett (2005) puts it, "What we give them to read must be worth reading" (p. 6). In a sense, the texts need to be literary from the perspective of a language learner, and this is why Day and Bamford (1998) propose the term "language learner literature" (p. 64) as an alternative to "simplified readers."

Stylistic examinations of the literary merits of simplified readers have led to conflicting conclusions. A comparison of an original and simplified version of *Adam Bede* leads Carter and Long (1991) to the conclusion that simplified texts are not appropriate materials for the teaching of literature. In contrast, Day and Bamford (1998) comment positively on the poetic, figurative language found in passages from well-written simplified readers, and they suggest that this will give EFL students the "opportunity to work out and appreciate such use of language" (p. 76).

Simplified readers may provide opportunities for learners to interpret and appreciate figurative language, but there is little research into the question of whether they actually do appreciate this language. In one investigation of book reports about simplified readers, Picken (2003) found evidence that language learners do express appreciation for metaphors, even relatively conventional ones. For example, one student commented in detail on a conventional metaphor about food being "wolfed down" by one of the characters. This also highlights the subjective nature of metaphor appreciation. "Wolfed down" was striking and novel from this learner's perspective even though dictionaries would describe it as conventional.

While there has been little work on language learners' evaluations of literature and figurative language, there is a body of L1 research on the topic. Much of this has focused on the role of figurative language in evaluation. Figurative language is often categorized into two main groups: schemes and tropes. Leech (1969) defines schemes as salient or "foregrounded repetitions of expression" (p. 74). Most obviously, this refers to the repetitions of sound that occur in alliteration, rhyme, etc., but it also includes patterns of grammatical and lexical repetition. Tropes consist of what Leech calls "irregularities of content" (p. 74), i.e., salient deviations related to meaning. Metaphor is an obvious example: In "Juliet is the sun," "sun" refers deviantly to Juliet.

Van Peer (1986) investigated NSs' evaluations of schemes and tropes. In one experiment, he changed the wording of poems in such a way that patterns of repetition were reduced or cases of deviance were made less deviant. Twenty-four students were asked to evaluate either the original lines or these re-written lines and van Peer found that the original lines tended to get higher evaluations. This tendency was particularly strong in the deviance-related lines—the lines with tropes such as metaphor.

Native-speaker evaluation of metaphor has also been examined. Much of this research focuses on the relationship between the interpretative challenge of metaphor and evaluation. Steen (1994) describes this as the "relation between clarity and richness" (p. 173). The basic idea is simple: Clear metaphors will be easy to interpret but lack richness. As a result, they will tend to get low evaluations as literary metaphors. For example, it is unlikely that Shakespeare's "sun" metaphor for Juliet would have attracted much attention if it had been written as an explicit comparison: "Juliet is like the sun to me in the sense that she

makes me feel warm." Here, the explicit focus on warmth removes many of the other potential meanings that the original metaphor has—meanings related to Juliet's "dazzling" visual impression, for example, or to her centrality in Romeo's universe. Thus, the explicit comparison lacks the richness of the original even though it is clearer.

In a series of experiments, Steen (1994) found support for the idea that literary metaphors tend to be evaluated positively even though they are felt to be difficult. At the same time, he also found that people's attitudes towards literature appeared to play a role. When he compared how his subjects processed metaphors in literary and in journalistic texts, he found that metaphors in literary texts tended to be interpreted and evaluated in much more detail. Zwaan (1993) also found significant differences between journalistic and literary reading. His subjects processed the same texts differently depending on whether they had been told that the texts were literary or journalistic. In the literary condition, Zwaan's subjects spent significantly more time reading the texts, and they also paid more attention to the precise wording of the texts.

In the final analysis, we may value metaphors for the simple reason that we learn something from them. Metaphors can give new meanings to words, and we value the discovery of these new meanings, just like the EFL student (see above) who enjoyed discovering that the noun "wolf" could be used as a verb in "wolf down" to describe a particular way of eating. As Giora (2003) puts it, the human mind "is constantly in search of novelty, regardless of whether it is figurative or literal" (p. 179). With reference to literature, Cook (1994) makes a similar point. In his view, literature teaches us things and changes our schematic knowledge of words and the world. He calls this the "schema-refreshing" effect of literature.

NSs may value relatively challenging metaphors in literature and be prepared to spend time processing them carefully, in order to learn something "schema-refreshing" from them, but it remains to be seen whether the same holds true for foreign language learners. Indeed, language learners may well discover value in places where NSs would not—as the earlier "wolf down" example suggests. Against this background, the research in the following sections investigates the language learner's experience of metaphor by varying the explicitness of metaphors in two short stories and getting Japanese students of English to evaluate the stories.

The "Night" study

As discussed in the previous section, metaphors can vary in explicitness. When they are explicit, they tend to be easy to interpret but lack "richness" of meaning. This trade-off between ease of processing and richness makes metaphor explicitness an excellent tool for research on how language learners evaluate metaphors. In the "Night" study (and the "Carpathia" study that follows), variation in metaphor explicitness was the main tool. The studies used two versions of very short stories, one ending with an explicit metaphor, the other with an inexplicit one. The participants were asked to evaluate these versions on a 7-point Likert scale.

Participants

Seventy-eight 3rd- and 4th-year students of English at a women's college in Japan participated. They came from five intact groups taking required courses for their major.

Materials

Two versions of a very short story called "Night" (Lott, 1992) were used. One version ended with the inexplicit metaphor "a dream that ended in darkness." The other ended with an explicit comparison: "it was like having a happy dream that ended in the darkness of his life's reality." The additions of "happy" and "of his life's reality" also serve to make the meaning more explicit.

Summary

A father wakes up at night and thinks he can hear his son breathing in his sleep in the next room. He gets up and goes to the room. When he switches on the light, the narrator explains that "[t]he room, of course, was unchanged. They had left the bed just as their child had made it, the spread merely thrown over bunched and wrinkled sheets, the pillow crooked at the head." The father switches off the light and returns to his own room with "his hands at his sides, his fingertips helpless."

Endings

a. Challenging, inexplicit metaphor: "He experienced this every night—a dream that ended in darkness."

b. Less challenging, explicit metaphor: "He experienced this every night—it was like having a happy dream that ended in the darkness of his life's reality."

Procedure

The two versions of the story were distributed at random, and the participants were given approximately 20 minutes to read the stories and do the following tasks:

Task A

Choose an interpretation of the final line from the four choices in an MCQ. Item "d" was expected to be the most common choice:

> d. The man's son had died, but every night the man woke up and imagined that his son was still alive. This was like a happy dream but in the end, the man always returned to his sad, dark reality.

Task B

Evaluate the story on a 7-point Likert scale running from "1" (the story was absolutely not worth reading) to "7" (the story was very well worth reading).

Task C

Indicate whether you *changed your interpretation* of the final sentence while reading the story or doing the MCQ task. (Note: This was included as an indirect measure of the interpretative challenge. A change of interpretation would indicate that a student had had to make more effort to reach a satisfactory interpretation than a student who had not needed an interpretation change to reach it, e.g., due to familiarity with the metaphorical potential of "darkness.")

Task D

If your interpretation changed, please also *indicate the effect of this change on your evaluation*: Did your evaluation go up, go down, or remain unchanged?

Results

The results of the study are summarized in Table 1. These results only cover the responses of the 73 students who selected interpretation "d"—the expected interpretation (see Task a above). These results will be discussed together with the results of the "Carpathia" study.

Table 1. Findings in the "Night" study

a. The mean evaluation of the story among all students was 5.096 (s.d.:1.002).
b. The inexplicit, challenging version was evaluated slightly more highly (Mean: 5.132; s.d.: .991) than the less challenging, explicit version (Mean: 5.057; s.d., 1.027), but no statistical significance can be attached to this difference.
c. Of the 50 students who experienced interpretation change, a large majority of 42 students reported that their evaluations of the story went up as a result (see tasks 3c and 3d above). Two students reported that their evaluations went down, 3 evaluations remained unchanged, and the remaining 3 cases could not be categorized. With a one-way chi-square value of 66.428, this is significant at a probability level of .001.*
d. The evaluation of the story among the 50 students who experienced interpretation change was also slightly higher (Mean: 5.120; s.d., .982) than it was among the 23 students who reported no such change (Mean: 5.043; s.d., .1065), but no statistical significance can be attached to this difference.

*The 3 cases that could not be categorized were excluded from this analysis.

The "Carpathia" study

Participants

Thirty-one 1st-year students of English at a women's college in Japan taking a required reading course.

Materials

A very short story called "Carpathia" (Kercheval, 1996) was used. The explicit and inexplicit versions of the metaphor are included at the end of the following summary of the story.

Summary

The narrator tells the story of her parents' honeymoon and its aftermath. The parents sail on the Carpathia, and they witness the distressing scene of the Titanic's shipwreck and the rescue of its survivors. The Carpathia returns to port with the survivors, and the parents return home from their honeymoon earlier than planned. At a welcome home party, the father gets drunk and makes the following comment about the Titanic: "They should have put the men in the lifeboats. Men can marry again, have new families. What's the use of all those widows and orphans?" His pregnant, 18-year-old wife is standing next to him, and she turns away when she hears this.

Endings

a. Challenging, inexplicit metaphor: "She was drowning. But there was no one there to help her."

b. Less challenging, explicit metaphor: "She was deeply upset and drowning in her heart. But there was no one there to help her."

Tasks

The tasks were identical to those used in the "Night" study, but the expected choice of interpretation in the MCQ task was "c":

c. The mother's feelings were hurt so badly by her husband's heartless words that she felt as if she were drowning in a cold sea.

Results

The results of the study are displayed in Table 2. This only covers the data of the 29 students who chose interpretation "c"—the expected choice.

Table 2. Findings in the "Carpathia" study

a. The mean evaluation of the story among all students was 5.310 (*s.d.*: 1.072)
b. The less challenging, explicit version was evaluated substantially more highly (Mean: 5.688; *s.d.*: .793) than the more challenging, inexplicit version (Mean: 4.846; *s.d.* 1.214). This difference is significant on the nonparametric median test with a T value of 2.256.*
c. Of the 7 students who experienced interpretation change, 3 reported that their evaluations went up. (Remainder: 1 down, 2 unchanged, 1 unclear)

d. The evaluation of the story among the 7 students who experienced interpretation change was slightly lower (Mean: 5.286; *s.d.*, .951) than among the 23 students who reported no such change (Mean: 5.318; *s.d.*, 1.129), but no statistical significance can be attached to this difference.

*It is significant if scores at the median are not counted and also if scores at the median are counted together with scores above the median (T = 2.129), but it is not significant if scores at the median are counted together with scores below the median (T = 1.701). The issue of using scores at the median in the median test is discussed in Hatch and Lazarton (1991).

Discussion

Although the two studies present a different picture, they both provide evidence that the challenge of interpretation played a significant role in the students' evaluations of the stories. The difference in metaphor explicitness played a substantial role in the evaluations of "Carpathia" although it had no apparent role in the evaluations of "Night." In contrast, the experience of interpretation change overwhelmingly raised evaluations of "Night," but this experience appeared to have little effect on evaluations of "Carpathia." Thus, taken together, the findings in the two studies were somewhat contradictory.

Of these two main findings, the one related to metaphor explicitness is more important because it has solid grounding in the metaphor research on the relationship between metaphor clarity and richness that was discussed earlier. Unfortunately, this finding is inconclusive: Metaphor explicitness only played a significant role in the "Carpathia" study. The second finding regarding the effect of interpretation change on evaluation is also inconclusive:

a strong relationship was found in the "Night" study, but there was no apparent relationship in the "Carpathia" study. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the subjective experience of interpretation change can have an overwhelmingly positive effect. Some aspect of this experience appears to have been "schema refreshing" from the point of view of the students in the "Night" study.

At the very least, the findings suggest that further research would be worthwhile, because significant differences were found in both cases. However, different stories were used in the two studies, so there may be a story factor that needs to be controlled for in future research. For example, Brewer (1996) suggests that story evaluations may be influenced by readers' feelings about whether a story ending is fair and just and by whether readers like the characters in a story. Factors like these may have played an intervening role in the "Carpathia" and "Night" studies. Age may also have been a factor: There was a 2- to 3-year age difference between the 1st-year students in the "Carpathia" study and the 3rd- and 4th-year students in the "Night" study. Thus, age (and the presumable difference in English proficiency related to it) also needs to be controlled in future research. Metaphor explicitness itself could also have played a role: Although variation in explicitness was used in both studies, the actual degree of this variation was not controlled. Thus, the difference may have been more pronounced in one of the studies, and this could also have affected the results. It may be possible to control for this to some extent by controlling the method of making metaphors explicit and only using, e.g., explicit similes for this purpose.

Conclusion

Both in work with literature and in extensive reading, it is important to know how foreign language learners value the literary reading experience. Research with NSs suggests that figurative language is a central aspect of what people value about literature. The two studies in the present paper were designed to find out whether the same holds true for language learners. These studies were concerned with the specific role of metaphor. Research with NSs suggests that relatively challenging, unclear metaphors in literature tend to be appreciated for their richness in meaning. The studies discussed above investigated whether this relationship also holds true for language learners. Both studies individually provided evidence that there is a relationship between interpretative challenge and positive evaluation. However, taken together the studies also contradicted one another. This suggests that further research is necessary, and the paper concluded with a number of suggestions regarding what needs to be done.

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