

Reading (and Writing) beyond the Lines

by VANESA POLASTRI

One teaching technique I often resort to is *the exploitation of textual gaps of indeterminacy*. I do this mainly to encourage creative and/or critical writing as well as speaking. Let me clarify that I consider “texts” in a broad sense, including verbal, visual, and audiovisual materials (written stories, read-alouds, films, images, songs, etc.). I carefully select those that are unclear, ambiguous, or open-ended, or those that have something purposefully unsaid. Texts with these kinds of gaps can be the fertile soil for the development of students’ imagination, reasoning, and self-expression.

I will illustrate the enactment of this technique as I have used it at different educational levels in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but you should be able to implement it in the context where you teach. In this article, I describe specific texts I have used as examples; near the end, I will give suggestions that teachers can use to find and select texts of their own to use in the same way.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

In primary school, I have used graded readers that invite filling in gaps of indeterminacy. One such reader is *Lucky Number*, by John Milne (2012), a story where a shoeshine boy finds a lottery ticket in the street. The narrative ends at the moment when the numbers are being revealed over the radio, but, while the first digits match the digits on the boy’s ticket, the last one is intentionally not mentioned. The story finishes with suspensive marks and is open-ended. Therefore, I ask my students to decide whether the protagonist would get the much-needed money and what would happen afterwards. Due to the students’ language

level, they can answer in simple language, through the use of the present simple tense. To express their opinions, students can write their own if they are able, or they can circle pre-framed options such as these: *He wins. / He doesn’t win. / He helps his family. / He buys sweets. / He doesn’t work anymore. / He continues working. / He plays. / He studies*. Having students circle their choice keeps the focus of the activity on reading, but it also forces students to understand the story and think creatively on their own.

Another graded reader that has worked well in primary school is *The Lost Ship*, by Stephen Colbourn (2012). In this story, a captain is leading his ship and crew home when they discover a strange ship nearby. They do not see anyone on that ship. The intrigue caused by that situation is a great opportunity to stop reading and ask students to attempt an explanation. We can pose questions for students to provide a yes/no answer, such as, “Are the people sleeping/eating/hiding inside the ship?”; “Are they swimming to the shore?”; and “Are they sailing home on a smaller boat?”

An option for this story is to ask the students to provide their own ideas and write them on the board in English in affirmative sentences under the title “Our Ideas.” Examples include “They are eating in the ship”; “They are swimming to the shore”; and so on. Then, after the students copy the co-constructed list from the board in their notebooks or folders, they must choose one idea, draw a sketch depicting that choice, and write the selected option as a caption. In this story, the captain mentions that there is no name on the strange ship either. As a result, students can come up with their own name for the ship, working individually or collaborating with a classmate.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

In secondary school, I have employed classic but provocative songs such as “You Give Love a Bad Name,” by Bon Jovi (1986), and “Suspicious Minds,” by Elvis Presley (1969). For each song, I have asked my students to answer back to the lyrics from the point of view of the woman in the relationship, as “she” is accused, in the first song, of being cruel to the singer and, in the second song, of being jealous and putting the couple’s relationship at risk with so many demands. Both lyrics are—in my opinion—one-sided male complaints. The concrete activity directions I give to my students are as follows: “If you were the person this song was addressed to and you listened to it on the radio, how would you feel? How would you react? You have the chance of telling the singer (or the world) your side of the story. Choose the genre you like best and write (a) a letter or an email to the singer, (b) a media announcement, or (c) a poem or the lyrics of your own song, answering back.” The students give the female character a voice, and the results in my classes have been rich and varied.

We have also read the abridged version of Roald Dahl’s “Lamb to the Slaughter,” entitled “The Leg of Lamb” (1996). In it, a police officer abandons his wife, who is six months pregnant, but his exact words to her are not made explicit, only suggested by the narrator’s line: “And he told her.” I ask my students to fill that indeterminacy gap: “What exactly did he tell her? Write a paragraph in the first person as if you were Mr. Maloney explaining the reason for the breakup.” Some of the students’ explanations began like this: “I don’t love you anymore ...”; “I met another woman ...”; “I want some time alone to clear my thoughts ...”; and “I want to focus on my career ...”; among others.

HIGHER EDUCATION

In a Written Discursive Practices course at a teacher-training college, I have made use of a similar textual approach. “The Case of the Arctic Explorer,” by Donald J. Sobol (1995),

presents a crime to be solved by the reader, in the company of Dr. Haledjian, the fictional detective in charge of the case. The story is meant to be read in only two minutes, and the solution to the case is missing. Therefore, the students need to conjecture who the criminal is by using pieces of evidence found in the text and their general knowledge. The brevity of the stories in the collection, *Still More Two-Minute Mysteries*, might mislead us into choosing to assign it in lower-educational levels, but the book combines two challenges for foreign-language learners: the cultural knowledge expected and linguistic subtleties that might go unnoticed.

In the epistolary narration “Having a Wonderful Time,” by J. G. Ballard (1994), Diana and Richard are kept “holidaying” indefinitely in a resort in the Canary Islands. Richard, who believes they were sent there to avoid being dismissed from their jobs in a time of economic stagnation, rebels openly and has a mysterious accident with an “apparently” unseaworthy boat. Meanwhile, Diana stays entertained with leisurely activities at the resort and writes postcards to a friend of hers back home. Are her letters really being sent to her friend, or do they lie in a pile at the local post office? Even Diana has her doubts about what is happening. I give students the choice to hypothesize what had actually happened to Richard, to answer one of Diana’s letters telling her about the real situation in their hometown, or to provide a possible ending, as time goes by and Diana is still stuck at the Spanish beaches. Will Diana eventually see what is going on and do something?

POTENTIAL LITERARY TEXTS

What should we, as teachers, pay attention to in literary texts that could be used for this activity? One approach is to find stories with missing bits of information. They might be detective stories such as “The Case of the Arctic Explorer” and other solve-them-yourself mysteries; due to the nature of the genre, their authors leave scattered clues in the text for the readers to put together and solve the case. Apart from those texts that

require a specific solution to a problem, there are others whose missing piece offers room for multiple, equally valid responses to the text. Examples are the absence of an explicit reason explaining why Mr. Maloney left his wife in “The Leg of Lamb” and the actual cause of what happened to Richard in “Having a Wonderful Time.”

However, besides the author’s intention to leave a loose thread, as in *Lucky Number*, almost every narrative has its silences. We can scrutinize any text to notice holes, aspects that are unclear, omitted characters, or unmentioned previous events that might have led to the events described in the text. We can also analyze the point of view from which the story is told to speculate about other characters’ perspectives, as in “You Give Love a Bad Name” and “Suspicious Minds.” It is also possible, for the purposes of this activity, to cut part of a text or to stop sharing a reading with students at a specific moment. The idea is to allow for divergent interpretations and predictions of how students think the story will go on. They base their opinions on the incomplete information they possess so far, thus exploiting the gap of indeterminacy (as in *The Lost Ship*).

ONLINE RESOURCES

For younger English language learners, you can check the “Finish Me” Stories section of the StuartStories website (<https://stuartstories.com/activities/finishme.html>), which has brief texts that are especially designed to promote writing. For older and more-advanced learners (or even yourself), you can find suggestions in the “Open Ended Short Stories” section of the Short Story Guide website (<https://www.shortstoryguide.com/open-ended-short-stories-ambiguous-endings-and-uncertainty-like-the-lady-or-the-tiger/>), which offers a curation of authentic pieces of narrative without a didactic intention behind the creation process.

CONCLUSION

Some texts are so well crafted that, through leaving gaps intentionally, they invite

answering back. However, the eye of the primary- or secondary-school teacher or the tertiary-level educator might be sharp enough to discover cracks, even in everyday texts, to open the door for students’ active, creative, and critical reading. The students’ endings, opinions, and reasons can result in written or oral productions of their own. This activity does not require using numerous or expensive resources, only a triggering text, understood in its broadest sense, and asking from it not what is given—i.e., a comprehension question—but what is deliberately hidden or left aside. This contributes to guessing from the context, taking a stance, and expressing ideas, orally or in writing, as students find ways to fill the gaps.

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