

---

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE STUDENTS

---

Dilys Karen Rees\*

---

### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the answers to a questionnaire given to the third, fourth and fifth year students of the “Licenciatura Português-Inglês” course. The object of the questionnaire was to find out what students believed about literature as a subject and as a part of their course. By knowing this, it would then be possible to better structure the literature subjects to aid the students in studying literature.

---

As a teacher of literature, it has been possible for me to note that students beginning their study of literature in the third year of their five year undergraduate course suffer a difficult transition from language classes to literature class. It is customary to hear students complain that they do well in their language classes; that they are able to express themselves adequately; that they can tell what they do in their daily lives and give opinions about certain up-to-date topics that are discussed in their classes. But when they arrive in literature class they understand very little and it is as if they are beginning to learn English over again. It is well to remember that in English language classes it is the voice of the English language community that is taught. That is the students learn the language that is considered common to most English speaking communities. They in turn seem to believe that by learning the contents of their language classes they will understand and be understood by the members of the English language community at large.

---

\* Mestre em Linguística Aplicada ao Ensino de Língua pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. Professora Assistente da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Goiás (UFG).

On the other hand, the literature class emphasizes the individual voice within the English language community. It is the voice that does not necessarily obey the common rules of language or communication that are generally obeyed by the community at large. This movement from the common English language voice (the orate language) to the individual voice (the literary language) is apparently one of the causes of so much difficulty for our students.

To illustrate this in simple terms, a foreign language student who has learned that the pronoun "it" is used for objects whereas the pronouns "he/she" are used for living beings can have difficulties, initially in literature classes, with personification. An example of this appears in the poem, "The Snow-Storm" by Emerson:

... the fierce artificer  
Curves his white bastions with projected roof  
Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.  
Speeding the myriad-handed, his wild work  
So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he  
For number or proportion...

Students, in my American literature classes, have spent a great deal of time trying to understand who the "artificer" and the "he" were, thinking that they referred to another human character in the poem because of the fact that they have learned that the pronoun "he" is always used for living beings.

As well as language problems, there are also problems of communication as exemplified in the short story "Pretty Mouth and Green my Eyes" by J. Salinger in which a puzzle is constructed around whether Joanie, one of the characters mentioned in the story, is indeed the girl who is in bed with Lee, one of the main characters whose telephone conversation we overhear. This puzzle is never clearly answered though there are numerous hints. For students accustomed to the orate style of the language class in which making yourself understood is all important, a story that contains a puzzle in which things are intentionally left unsaid and unexplained, becomes very difficult.

These are just a couple of the difficulties that the students have shown in my literature classes though many more of this type could be enumerated.

Realizing that the students faced difficulties in studying literature in a foreign language, I became curious as to how these same students looked upon literature classes. I wanted to know how they understood the subject of literature that is, in regards to its place in the “Letras” course; its importance or lack thereof; their need of studying it; their difficulties and their frustrations. By knowing what the students thought of the literature they had to study, it would then be possible to structure a course that would better meet their needs. Using the input from the students I felt it would then be possible to help them find their own individual voice in the foreign language as they studied other individual voices in literature. It would also help in the transition from orate to literary language; from community to individual voice.

For this purpose I then made up a questionnaire containing nine questions inquiring as to literature as well as to the students’ reading habits (see Appendix). The students could answer in Portuguese. This was done to allow the students to answer with greater freedom of expression in their mother tongue.

The questionnaires were given to students in the third, fourth and fifth years, that is, to all the students doing English language literature in the “Licenciatura Português-Ingês” (Teaching Certificate: Portuguese and English) course. The students answered the questionnaires voluntarily. There was a total of forty-three (43) answered questionnaires out of a possible total of fifty (50). This numerical difference was due to student absence on the day the questionnaire was given out. Naturally the students were told that they were to answer anonymously. As well, the students did not know beforehand that there would be a questionnaire that day.

Throughout this analysis I view discourse as

um dispositivo que abre seus caminhos,  
que negocia continuamente através de  
um espaço saturado de palavras, palavras  
outras (Maingueneau, 1989: 95).

There are then two discursive moments that overlap in the answering of the questionnaires. There are the questions that were formulated by the teacher and the answers proffered by the students each written from within different and overlapping discursive formations.

With this understanding of discourse in mind, I noted that no student opposed answering the questionnaire. This could be attributed to the fact that since the teacher of literature was handing out the questionnaires a situation of obligatory “speech” was imposed. Agreeing with my view of discourse, I understand that a text is not an inert grouping of words demanding simply to be deciphered by the reader. Rather, it is inserted in an enunciative scene in which the places of production, interpretation and response have already been assigned. In a classroom setting the teacher speaks from a position of power greater than that of the students. Thus the questionnaire was inserted in a scene in which the teacher has more authority and they, though informed that it was not obligatory to answer the questionnaire, nevertheless expressed no negative feelings regarding the situation. As well, as Oswald Ducrot (1977: 103) states: “... a pergunta não se contenta em oferecer o diálogo, mas o impõe...” Thus the format of a questionnaire in which questions are asked also imposes answers.

There were, however, a few students who did not answer all of the questions on the questionnaire. Out of the forty-three (43) answered questionnaires those with unanswered questions totaled six (6) all in the third year. They were a minority and they did not explain why they did not answer. But silence speaks for it is not empty of meaning. As Orlandi (1992: 47) states:

O silêncio não é diretamente  
observável e no entanto ele  
não é o vazio, mesmo do ponto  
de vista da percepção: nós o  
sentimos, ele está “lá”...

Thus, the students in choosing not to answer the questions force the asymmetry in the relation of power to come to the fore again.

In addition, in the answers no student questioned the concept of literature and the importance that is given to it in our society. Nor did they question the need to study literature in their teaching certificate (“licenciatura”) course. Literature appears to be accepted as a natural obligation that exists and that is not debated. Apparently its existence is an implicit and part of social consensus. In Zarate’s (1986: 17) view this would be so for the implicit

permet une économie de réflexion en  
ne mobilisant, pour l'échange communicatif  
en cours ou la pratique du jeu, que les  
fragment de savoir qui se situent dans un rapport  
immédiat à la situation donnée.

Therefore in the situation of a questionnaire in a classroom within the university setting the easiest would be to consider the implicit as given and unarguable.

Although there was no questioning of literature as such, yet students did use the answers to the questionnaires to express their criticisms of certain aspects of the study of literature they did not like and of certain classroom practices they did not agree with. The students questioned that which was within the limits of the implicit. Thus the study of poetry came under attack:

Eu não gosto de poesia  
Poesia é cansativa para analisar.  
... poesia é difícil de entender  
*Fourth year students*

Não gosto de poesia em português,  
imagina em English.  
São obras muito massantes.  
*Third year students*

Indicated in the use of words such as “analisar” and “obras” poetry is related to classroom study and not to other lyrical manifestations such as popular songs. These words are redolent of the classroom and its activities to assign and check reading.

The word “difícil” also brings the classroom to mind in the sense that to “understand” in many reading activities is to “unveil” the meaning. In poetry the “unveiling” is more complex and thus poetry becomes “difficult”. Poetry is not the sound of language rolling of the tongue or the expression of an individual voice but basically a dissection performed in a search of meaning. There is no sense that a poetic text can be (McCourt: 1996) “... like having jewels in my mouth when I say the words”<sup>1</sup>. Rather, the text must be unveiled, paraphrased, encapsulated.

The students, also, questioned the way in which literature was taught as in this quote from a third year student:

Entretanto, o estudo da literatura deveria ser algo agradável, em que pudéssemos conhecer autores e obras de forma completa sem sofrimento para o aluno.

Or as this other third year students said using English to express her ideas:

I think it's necessary to study literature but not the way that has been taught. Because some teachers think we are great computer, and we are able to memorize all things they ask us.

A third students says the following:

É necessário, mas não de forma tão seca: matéria, matéria, matéria - prova.

Thus we see no criticism of literature per se but a dissatisfaction with the types of classes held which judging from the descriptions given by the students involve regimented classroom activities such as lectures and memorization with tests being the only form of evaluation. It would seem in the description the students give, that their own reading of the text is not respected but rather they must dominate another reading which could be that of the teacher or that of literary criticism. Either way, literature in these students' quotes is seen as having a specific content that must be learned. In these quotes, the problem is not how to read but how to dominate the content. Literature in this view is not about reading but about having dominion over a certain group of ideas and thoughts.

These criticisms appear in the third and fourth year answers but not in the fifth year. This could be due to the fact that in the third and fourth years the students are studying Portuguese as well as English and are overburdened with subjects. They study several literatures at the same

time in English and in Portuguese. We can see an analysis of the third year which follows this line of thinking in the quote below:

... se a grande necessidade que temos é de uma Língua, uma vez que não lecionaremos literatura no 2º grau, acho que um ano para cada literatura seria o suficiente, assim, o 3º ano não ficaria tão sobrecarregado de literaturas e poderíamos nos dedicar mais e melhor.

We now lead on in our discussion to include the concept of heterogeneity. According to Authier-Revuz (sem data: 99) it is constitutive of the subject and of its discourse and can be marked and unmarked. In Authier-Revuz's words the marked forms of heterogeneity represent

... des modes divers de négociation du sujet parlant avec l'hétérogénéité constitutive de son discours.

On examining the definitions that the students gave of literature, it is possible to discern the forms of marked heterogeneity such as in the following quote with a word set off by quotation marks:

Literatura é o estudo de textos que tenha um certo grau estético e o "fingire" (fingir) poético. (third year students)

The voice of the Other is marked within the students' definition of literature. The quoted word is in another language and contains the definition of what literature is. As the word is marked and purposely set apart from the students' own discourse, it receives emphasis and is the authoritative word within the clause. The quotation marks and the use of another language mark the fact that this word is from without the students' discourse and is related to another voice presumably that of a professor of literature. Thus the marked heterogeneity within this

students' discourse is an appeal to an authority that in turn validates the students' definition.

In a questionnaire answered by a fourth year student, the following definition of literature was given:

É a expressão de um sentimento de  
uma idéia num determinado período  
de tempo, daí a razão de termos  
diversos períodos: Barroco, Arcadismo,  
Modernismo etc. Todos expressam  
de forma escrita as diferentes idéias  
da época.

By using the colon and making a list of the names given to literary time periods, we see that the student is referring to classroom content and to the voice of the literature teacher. It is this voice that authenticates and validates the definition of literature, for it is the voice of power within the university system. Another fourth year student presents a similar definition of literature:

Literatura é a arte de escrever  
sobre uma determinada época. Por  
exemplo, em Literatura Brasileira  
vimos os diferentes períodos  
expressos através de obras que contém  
as determinadas características  
de tais períodos.

The Other voice is that of the teacher in the classroom. This voice is marked within the students' discourse by the direct reference to the subject of Brazilian Literature which is set apart by the use of capital letters. It is from within the classroom discourse on this subject that the student gives her definition. Thus, the marked heterogeneity of the Other voice validates the student's own definition.

Other definitions do not use the recourse of quotation marks, colons or direct reference but also show the voice of the Other. This marked heterogeneity can be seen by the fact that the discourse changes and becomes dissonant in relation to its entirety. For example in the following definition of literature from a third year student, it is possible to note a

change in the student's discourse:

Literatura é a arte de se expressar  
através das palavras. Pode ser consi-  
derada uma das maneiras mais belas  
de mentir.

The use of the word *as* in the final sentence of the definition sets apart what comes after it. The very fact that this segment is set apart from the rest of the statement creates the possibility of authority and authenticates the definition of the student.

Thus, there are students that authenticate their definitions by marked reference to another voice. This Other voice in the definitions examined is the voice of the professor of literature which in turn, validates the student's definition.

Other definitions found in the students' questionnaires make reference to feelings and sentiments evoked by literary works and to its subjective quality.

A literatura ao contrário de textos não-  
literários é capaz de provocar emoções em  
seu usuário. (Fourth year student)

... it gives the reader opportunities to feed  
his/her intimacy (intimo) or his/her soul.  
(fifth year - written in English)

É a expressão de um sentimento... (Fourth  
year student)

In these definitions we can see that literature is set apart from other texts and has power that other texts do not have. This agrees with the vision that society has of literature as a canon of superior works of art. Yet, at the same time that these texts are set apart, according to the above definitions, they appeal to the intimate and to the subjective. This, in my opinion, raises the question of how then in the students' view, literature can be taught and evaluated. The school system and the way in which it is organized with bi-mesters and grades and averages and final tests regards learning as objective and is product-oriented. Perhaps, here there

is a clue to part of the students' frustration in literature class. If it is understood as being something intimate that speaks to the soul, then having it evaluated, discussed and graded could be a conflict.

As well students see literature as teaching the culture of the target language:

... é uma oportunidade de conhecermos  
uma cultura diferente, com valores  
diferentes dos nossos. (Third year student)

... devemos conhecer a cultura desse povo  
e o caminho possível que a distância nos  
permite é a literatura. (Third year student)

Literature is a part of the language study  
where you study mostly the cultural aspects  
of the language. (Fifth year) (Written in English)

Se estamos dispostos a aprender uma  
língua estrangeira devemos estudá-la de  
forma a conhecer sua cultura também e não  
há forma melhor do que através da literatura.  
(Fourth year student)

The use of the word culture here in these definitions refers to the different visions of life that exist in different societies or as Claire Kramsch (1993: 2) puts it "... multiple ways of viewing and talking about roses". Culture in these definitions is not seen as 'high-brow' versus 'low-brow' of the literary canon versus popular works.

The students expect to come in contact with different views of life in the literary classroom. Inevitably multiple visions of life lead to conflict. And it is out of this conflict that a greater understanding of another culture ensues. Perhaps due to this conflict and due to the fact that it is not usually discussed openly in the classroom, the students' sense of frustration rises even more in literature classes. In language classes, on the other hand, the universal meanings and possibilities across cultures are taught. Conflict tends to be avoided and when culture is mentioned it is as an appendage to language learning that can be memorized and dominated

through such rules. The students apparently feel they will learn the other culture in literature class not in language class.

Various students understand that literature will help them learn language and thus for this reason it should be studied:

... com a literatura podemos melhorar  
nossa fluência, aquisição de vocabulário.  
(Third year student)

... é importante para o aperfeiçoamento  
da nossa escrita ... (Third year student)

... enriquecer o nosso vocabulário... (Third year)

Através da leitura de obras literárias o  
aluno toma conhecimento da língua em suas  
diversas modalidades.  
(Fifth year)

These expectations could lead to frustration for it is quite possible that the literature teacher is not teaching from this perspective. Thus, the expectations of the students do not agree with what a literature teacher expects from the class. If these different expectations are not dealt with clearly in class both the teacher and the students could find themselves working at cross-purposes.

As well as the problem of orate versus literary language, looking over the discussion of the questionnaires, it is possible to note that the students accept the existence of literature class in spite of the difficulties they have with the subject. They are aware of these difficulties and in some cases as for example the study of poetry, they attribute the difficulties to the subject matter. That is, they do not suppose that the way poetry is dealt with in class could perhaps be the source of some of the problems. Rather, poetry itself is to blame. This view indicates a passive understanding of the role of the reader as the producer of meaning. This also indicates a passive understanding of the role of the student in instigating change in the classroom procedures.

This same type of passivity is apparent in the criticism of the way in which literature class is taught. The teacher is the one to blame and the student is reduced to complaining about it. There seems to be little

thought that the student can change the situation or at least contribute in some small way towards change. In his discourse the student does not challenge the asymmetry in the relation of power. Though, it is well to remember that six (6) students by their not answering the questions of the questionnaire did challenge this asymmetry. Thus, it is possible for students to work within the power system and subvert it.

As for the students' expectations for literature class, we were able to note how ample they are. The student as well as acquiring theoretical knowledge, as demonstrated in the use of the marked forms of heterogeneity, expects to receive a lot from the class. Yet, at the same time these expectations are contradictory. On the one hand, the theoretical knowledge is repeated as if by rote. On the other hand, the students state that literature speaks to the soul and has a depth of feeling that is individual. Yet, the institutional setting in which the classroom is situated is product oriented in many ways. Thus, in the literature classroom expectations and ideas that are at opposite points of the spectrum coexist side by side. This, no doubt, creates conflict and frustration.

Other expectations such as those that see the literature classroom as the place to learn culture and as the place to learn more about language are probably in conflict with the teacher's view of the classroom. The teacher no doubt sees culture and language as learning by-products of the literature classroom and not the purpose of the class.

By being aware of the students' expectations for the literature class, it is possible to begin working toward diminishing the frustration and the conflicts in the class. Simply by talking clearly about expectations throughout the school year can ease many of the frustrations. Also, by encouraging students to state their opinions about the class assignments and tasks can lead to a greater understanding between teacher and student. As well, the students need to be encouraged to see themselves as producers of their own readings of the texts used in class. For this, the teacher needs to be open to other readings besides his own.

It is my opinion that by encouraging the students to be more participative in the class organization and by being clearer of the course expectations many of the frustrations will disappear and many of the conflicts will be handled in a more positive, growth-inducing way. Thus, the transition from being an English student in language class to also being a student in literature should become easier and less traumatic.

---

## RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as respostas a um questionário aplicado aos alunos do terceiro, quarto e quinto ano da habilitação Português-Inglês do Curso de Letras da UFG. O objetivo do questionário foi saber a visão dos alunos sobre literatura e assim com esta informação estruturar melhor as matérias de literatura.

---

## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

#### YOU MAY ANSWER IN PORTUGUESE

1. How do you define literature?
2. What, in your opinion, distinguishes a literary work?
3. In your opinion, is it necessary to teach literature in the 'Letras' course? Why or why not?
4. In your opinion, is it necessary to teach literature in the 'Licenciatura Português-Inglês' course? Why or why not?
5. Which do you prefer to study in English language literature - prose, poetry or drama? Why or why not?
6. Do you like poetry (in Portuguese or in English)? Why or why not?
7. If you answered yes to question 6, list your favourite poets.
8. What kind of books do you read in your spare time? Why or why not?
9. If you don't read in your spare time, explain why.

#### NOTES

1. McCourt (1996) makes this statement regarding Shakespeare, "I don't know what it means and I don't care because it's Shakespeare and it's like having jewels in my mouth when I say the words".

## REFERÊNCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

- AUTHIER-REVUZ, J. Hétérogénéité(s) Énonciative(s). *Langages*, s.d., p.73.
- DUCROT, O. *Princípios de Semântica Lingüística*. Trads. C. Vogt. R. Ilari, R.A. Figueira. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1977.
- EMERSON, R.W. Snowstorn. *The Anthology of American Literature*. Houghton: Mifflin, 1976.
- KRAMSCH, C. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP, 1993.
- MAINGENEAU, D. *Novas Tendências em Análise do Discurso*. Campinas, São Paulo: Editora da UNICAMP/PONTES, 1989.
- McCOURT, Frank. *Angela's Ashes*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- ORLANDI, E.P. *As Formas do Silêncio*. Campinas/SP: Editora da UNICAMP, 1992.
- SALINGER, J.D. Pretty Mouth, Green my Eyes. In *Nine Stories*. Boston: Bantam Books, 1968.
- ZARATE, G. *Enseigner une culture étrangère*. Paris: Hachette, 1986.