

9 | English for Understanding One Another: A Critique of the National EFL Curriculum for Undergraduate English Courses in Iranian Universities

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INTRODUCTION

In most of our English departments in Iran EFL means teaching English through English literature. From the third semester out of seven and sometimes eight assigned to undergraduate studies, the first course in literature is offered by introducing the first volume of Laurence Perrine's *Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* to the students who, as far as I have been concerned, usually have a long way to go before they can even read the stories in the book and 'understand' them. The situation becomes more problematical when one realizes that most students are only fresh high school graduates with little knowledge of modern literature in English or any other language who have decided to major in English just because they have found it a prestigious foreign language with future job opportunities as language teachers rather than a rich source of cultural or aesthetic artifacts. Therefore, they are usually puzzled by the density of materials in the book, including vocabulary, sentence and discourse structure and, more importantly, the way meaning is supposed to be communicated indirectly through literature texts. According to my experience of 15 years of teaching English in Iranian universities, most students entering universities for the purpose of majoring in the language do not have a clear picture in mind of what they might be introduced to. English literature courses, therefore, are usually a shock to them especially when we realize that they are flooded in the following semesters with subjects such as short story, an introduction to the novel I & II, literary schools, literary criticism I & II, simple poetry and prose, advanced poetry and prose, selected literary texts, the translation of literary texts, drama I & II (including ancient Greek tragedies, Shakespearean tragedies, comedies

and historical plays, and modern dramatic works), history of English literature I & II and research methods I & II with special attention towards researching literature. What may happen in such a context is that, in the most optimistic conditions, the talented students who would not like to lose the opportunity of being a university student would get along with the course requirements and eventually end up as what Professor Jun Liu, the plenary speaker of the conference, calls language learners who are textually competent but communicatively incompetent in the multiplicity of today's sociocultural settings. Professor Liu's example for such students is quite similar to that of mine. According to Professor Liu, the student comes across the department secretary in the corridor who greets him saying "what a lovely day!" And the student replies by reciting a Romantic poem on a lovely day, although the secretary does not wait to hear the poem to the end! In a rather similar situation, our first top female student totally absorbed in English literature applied for the position of secretary in a chocolate factory in Tabriz, Iran with the main responsibility of corresponding in English, but, unfortunately, she was rejected, mockingly suggested that she should have applied for a position in some poets' society because she could not write and translate business letters! If Professor Liu calls such people communicatively incompetent, I would like to put it in other words and say that they are out of touch with the real world and trapped in the web of 'virtual reality' of literature, borrowing the term from Birch (1989). And even worse than that, according to my personal experiences, is such students' indifferent attitude towards what lies outside the virtual reality of the literature texts. Thus I am of the opinion that something really serious should be done in this regard if we are to empower Asia and ourselves through new paradigms in ELT. We are in need of curricula that would take us into the heart of the real world and enable us to communicate effectively with others for a more balanced life and justice in the world. Why could not my first top student get the job she needed, for instance? What I will do below is draw upon some recent findings in English, linguistics and cultural studies to throw light on supposedly underlying principles leading to the English curriculum in most Iranian universities. But rather than attempting a technical, point by point rebuttal of the curriculum, I would like to give a kind of impressionistic explanation of the situation on the basis of both my own experiences and the discussions in line with my position. (For a rather detailed survey of the situation of the teaching of English literature in Iranian universities, see Behnam, 1995.) This should provide insights into curriculum innovations and implementation strategies in EFL contexts like Iran if we aim at empowering Asia through new paradigms in English language education.

The way English is treated in our English departments, according to my experiences, is a legacy of what Fuery and Mansfield (1997), for instance, call the humanistic approach to literature, and its language, dominant in Western academia for centuries. What Fuery and Mansfield say in this regard can be regarded as a reflection of what usually happens in our English departments.

A traditional introductory course in English would usually be structured around a set of canonical texts chosen from a certain period or from a range of genres. The course would deal with these texts in depth, through close reading and textual analysis, in order either to accumulate an understanding of the culture of the specific historical period, or to enumerate the features of a range of genres. ... There may also be accompanying lectures on research techniques, library skills, essay writing, and perhaps some overview of theoretical material, which may be more or less integrated into the course's textual analyses. Although the historical period exists either as the backdrop to, or goal of, the teaching, the focus of such courses is usually on the texts themselves.... In fact, the goal and rationale of such teaching usually invests a huge amount of significance in certain texts or types of texts. They are worthy of study *in themselves*. The texts are an access to values and ideas that exist 'before,' 'besides' or 'through' them, but it is the texts themselves that constitute and justify the process of their study. To some teachers, if the students have merely read the texts, then the greater part of the work has been done. Theoretical issues about texts, politics, and culture are subordinate to the reading of texts. They are serviceable only as they aid in the reading of the texts themselves. (pp. xvi-xvii)

The introduction of the significance of linguistics and discourse analysis in the reading of texts by some Iranian graduates from British universities in 1990s resulted in some extremes in this regard which, I believe, should be viewed with a critical eye. This should be done by drawing upon findings in related fields which might throw light on the deficiencies of English language education based on the significance attributed solely to the 'language' regardless of theoretical issues about texts, politics and culture. In this chapter, after forming a background on the basis of relevant cultural and linguistic studies, I will provide two readings of "The Silence,"

an Australian short story, first within the framework of Systemic Linguistics and then within the broad context of Australian culture and society. I am aiming at two goals by this. First, I want to show that we could go beyond the limits of 'English' literature and the canonized texts in our English departments by introducing texts from the world literatures. Second, I want to make the act of reading an exploration of real world by presenting a critique of a linguistic approach to literature which is textual in nature and somehow dominant in our English departments.

LANGUAGE AND THE WESTERN 'CIVILIZATION'

The 'humanistic approach' that Fuery and Mansfield refer to seems to be deeply rooted in the Western culture and civilization. Strangely enough, a study by Greenblatt (1990), "Learning to curse: aspects of linguistic colonialism in the sixteenth century" (pp. 16-39), not only supports this but also reveals how the attribution of significance to a language might arise from prejudices in a particular race and/or culture.

Historically speaking, for the Europeans of the Renaissance, the pioneers of European Humanism, who regarded Caucasian Europeans and their perspective as central to the world, the people of the newly discovered lands, who were supposed not to have a culture and language, were sort of creatures ready for any kind of assignments. The first thing Europeans pursued was to convert the indigenous people into Christianity, and learning a European language was a necessity in this regard. According to Greenblatt (1990),

in his journal entry for the day of days, 12 October 1492, Columbus expresses the thought that the Indians ought to make good servants, "for I see that they repeat very quickly whatever was said to them." He thinks, too, that they would easily be converted to Christianity "because it seemed to me that they belonged to no religion." And he continues: "I, please Our Lord, will carry off six of them at my departure to Your Highness, that they may learn to speak." (p. 17)

And Greenblatt immediately concludes that

The first of the endless kidnappings, then, was plotted in order to secure interpreters; the primal crime in the New World was

committed in the interest of language. But the actual phrase of the journal merits some attention: “that they may learn to speak” We are dealing, of course, with an idiom: Columbus must have known, even in that first encounter, that the Indians could speak But the idiom has a life of its own; it implies that the Indians had no language at all. (p. 17)

Similar ideas, according to Greenblatt, can be found even in Saint Augustine’s writings. Saint Augustine once wrote, “A man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than with a foreigner” (p. 18).

Greenblatt then argues that no dramatic changes can be detected in the European attitude towards the native Americans throughout the sixteenth century. However, one thing is clear: the exported European religion was later replaced with ‘language.’ Thus Samuel Daniel in 1599 finishes his long philosophical poem – “Musophilus” – thus,

And who – in time – knows whither we may vent
The treasure of our tongue? To what strange shores
This gain of our best glory shall be sent
To enrich unknowing – nations with our stores?
What worlds in the yet unformed Occident
May come refin’d with the accents that are ours?

The concept of the role of language in classifying people into ‘civilized’ and ‘cultured’ on the one hand and ‘barbaric’ and ‘wild’ on the other does not belong to the past only because its impact can be traced up to the present as well. Mühlhäusler’s work (1996), for example, shows how the West’s continuous modernization process in the past two hundred years has from both linguistic and cultural point of view affected culturally several areas in the world including the Pacific region. In such areas due to the imperialistic policies local languages are either completely dead now or have been replaced officially with the imperialists’ languages. Mühlhäusler argues that, by appealing to economic and political capabilities, the West’s imperialistic forces have managed to achieve their goals in several areas in the world to create a monolingual and monocultural world through exporting their language and culture. This, according to Mühlhäusler, has been a systematic policy to eradicate local native languages and replace them with specifically English especially in the Pacific region. He presents a governmental document by Gunther, an executive agent in New Papua Guinea in 1958, emphatically urging the replacement of 510 native

languages with English to educate people.

AESTHETICS AND THE WESTERN ‘CIVILIZATION’

One of the important aspects of the West’s aesthetic definition of ‘civilization’ can be found in Immanuel Kant’s concepts of the reading of literature. According to Kant’s philosophy (1986), the reading of the literary text can be a criterion for judging people: If the reader of the literary text reads the text and understands it according to a set of defined aesthetic criteria, then we can have a positive attitude towards him; otherwise we should look down upon him. The raising of this concept is important here because it is one of the issues eventually leading to a moral, aesthetic and literary movement in English studies that Eagleton (1983) refers to as ‘the Rise of English’ taking place for the purpose of honoring the English language and literature against the decadence the intellectuals experienced in their society (see Fuery & Mansfield, 1997). Under the influence of critics such as Richards and Leavis (1952), two outstanding British critics and pioneers in the ‘New Criticism,’ arrived at this conclusion that in order to protect the English culture and civilization there is no way but to appeal to the understanding of ‘morality’ and ‘spirituality’ derived from the ‘beauty’ residing in the literary text. For these people, then, truth was beauty and beauty was truth, and beauty was nothing except the *full body* of the literary text. (The term is that of Richards, 1958.) The proponents of this concept were in fact looking for things in the literary text that they thought were missing in the real world. Thus the experience of the reading of the literary text according to a set of rules and guidelines put forward by the specialist critics would lead the reader to *the* right path and would save him from the surrounding decadence. For the proponents of this concept language is the blood in the vessels of the English culture, and any damage to it would lead to the destruction of the culture. The role of language is so important from this point of view that the translatability of the literary text is totally out of question; any blow to the *full body* of the text is an irredeemable damage to ‘beauty’ and ‘truth.’

From the standpoint of this chapter it can be argued that the proponents of this concept have been looking for beauty and truth only in a set of western literary texts, and thus have remained generally uninformed of other cultures and languages. For them it is only through English language and individual literary works that the crisis they think they experience throughout the world can be confronted and contained; the road to the

western version of civilization runs through the 'English' culture realized in its language and literature. Any other culture is therefore of no outstanding significance and should be dispensed with.

From the standpoint taken in this chapter, coming into contact with the cultures of others is a necessity to broaden one's world view and experience reality from 'novel' angles. Thus EFL studies or any related fields such as the study of western culture are undeniable. However, from the viewpoint of this chapter, what seems to be problematic in this regard is 1) the total devotion of the disciplines to a single culture and assigning it a centrality that eventually results in the marginalization and forgetfulness of other cultures; and 2) the decontextualized nature of the handling of the literary text in both the theories of reading literature and the linguistic analysis of literature. But in the light of what was said above, this should be considered in accordance with the imperialistic, colonial tendencies of the western culture. What should be done in this regard, therefore, is 're-interpret' the 'English' studies so that 'English' changes from a floodgate for concepts from the West into a means of intercultural communication. Everyone should have the opportunity to speak; the West's attempts to construct the 'Tower of Babel' for monocultural and monolingual state should be challenged. This might be achieved through introducing approaches to English in our EFL situations within the framework of which we will be able to empower Asia through new paradigms in English language education.

Halliday's theory of language as a semantics-based linguistic theory has been gaining ground rapidly within the context of Iranian universities. Here I want to show that the application of this theory to the analysis of literature, which has been suggested by Halliday (1971) and 'improved' by systemicists such as Hasan (1971, 1975, 1979, 1985) is problematic because of the decontextualized nature of the handling of the literary text in systemic stylistics. My assumption is that contextualization will enable the reader to understand the reality of cultural differences through the reading of literature.

SYSTEMIC STYLISTICS

In 1971, Halliday presented a paper on the application of his findings in systemic linguistics to the analysis of the literary text. The paper, which tackles the analysis of extracts from William Golding's *The Inheritors*, is in a way of a particular significance. The importance of this paper lies in its

intention to account for the ‘peculiarities’ of language use in literature within the framework of a general theory of language. A key point in this regard is Halliday’s definition of the concept of ‘foregrounding.’ From his viewpoint of the semantic-based nature of language, Halliday believes that foregrounding is prominence that is semantically motivated. This means that if one is to look for the regularities in the linguistic patterns of the literary text that stand out in some way, one should look for the regularities that relate to the meaning of the text as a whole.

Foregrounding, as I understand it, is prominence that is motivated. It is not difficult to find patterns of prominence in a poem or prose text, regularities in the sounds or words or structures that stand out in some way, or may be brought out by careful reading, and one may often be led in this way towards a new insight through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer’s total meaning. (Halliday, 1971, p. 339)

This notion implies that those outstanding features of the text that do not relate to the meaning of the text should be dispensed with. The reason is that if prominence does not contribute to the writer’s total meaning, “it will seem to lack motivation” Thus, “a feature that is brought into prominence will be ‘foregrounded’ if only if it relates to the meaning of the text as a whole” (1971, p. 339).

To support this, Halliday (1971) analyzes the extracts from *The Inheritors* from the viewpoint of the system of Transitivity as an aspect of ideational meaning. This analysis reveals how the cognitive limitations of the primitive protagonist of the novel are depicted and conveyed by means of language. (See the extract from the novel in Appendix 1.) The outstanding feature Halliday detects in the extracts is the frequency of the use of intransitive verbs and a particular lack of transitive verbs with human agents as subjects.

From Halliday’s point of view, the linguistic structures used by Golding are a depiction of Lok’s universe in which inanimate objects appear to move by themselves when they have actually been moved by a person. Consider the following, for example: ‘The bushes twitched,’ ‘A stick rose upright,’ ‘The stick began to grow shorter at both ends’ and ‘The dead tree by Lok’s ear acquired a voice.’ On the other hand, if there are human agents as the subjects of the clauses, they are the subjects of intransitive verbs. This means that they do not seem to have any influence on their surroundings. Consider: ‘Lok steadied by the tree and gazed,’ ‘The man

turned sideways in the bushes.’ What Lok and ‘the man’ do in these clauses are realized through the material processes with no influence on any participants as the goals of the processes. On the basis of this observation, Halliday (1971) concludes that the picture depicted in the extracts “is one in which people act, but they do not act on things; they move, but they move only themselves, not other objects” (p. 349). Eventually, for the reason that the language relating to Lok is of a primitive nature and reveals his primitiveness, he and his group are conquered by the more advanced ‘new people’ in the novel.

LITERATURE AS ARTISTIC REALIZATION OF ‘THEME’

Hasan’s theory of literature with its roots in the Prague School of Linguistics and her ‘modification’ of Halliday’s systemic account of literature emphasizes the context-free nature of language use in literature. She claims that “of all the varieties of a language, literature is the one which makes the most tenuous contact with the contextual construct” (1975, p. 54). In other words, in literature, according to Hasan (1971, 1975, 1985), the ‘controlling device’ or ‘regulative principle’ for the structural organization and verbalization of the literary text should be different from the ‘regulative principle’ involved in the context-bound language use. For Hasan, in literature the ‘regulative principle’ is not the context-bound ‘meaning’ but the context-free ‘theme.’

By the notion of ‘theme’ Hasan refers to the rather traditional Aristotelian concept of literature. For Aristotle, according to Hasan (1971), literature is the depiction of universal potentialities through particular events and themes. Whatever is put forward in a literary work as a theme is a generalization or hypothesization of the nature of the universe and man’s relation to it. From this point of view, Hasan’s notion of ‘theme’ is a “generalisation or an abstraction, as such being closely related to all forms of hypothesis-building” (p. 310). Thus, ‘theme’ having replaced the context-bound ‘meaning,’ the question of the role of the contextual factors involved in the production of the text is eliminated from the domain of literary studies. The literary text is no longer a context-bound phenomenon; it is a thematically-motivated language use that conveys a ‘theme’ as a generalization of the human situation in the universe.

For Hasan, the ‘artfulness’ of language use in literature also lies in the way the language is patterned to depict the theme and convey it to the

reader. From Hasan's point of view (1971, 1985), this is achieved through literature's double-layer-symbolization nature. By this, Hasan means that the theme reaches the level of verbalization through two stages of 'symbolization.' "The categories of the code of language are used to symbolize a set of situations, events, processes, entities, etc. (as they are in the use of language in general); these situations, events, entities, etc., in their turn, are used to symbolize a theme ..." (Hasan, 1971, p. 309).¹ Hasan refers to the former level of symbolization in literature as 'verbalization' and to the latter as 'symbolic articulation.' Therefore, she sees a relation between verbal art and human language as two semiotic systems (see Hasan, 1979, p. 117 & 1985, p. 99). Thus, what materializes both the 'symbolic articulation' and the 'theme' is the 'verbalization.' In other words, it is through the patterns of language that the reader becomes aware of the theme of the literary work. The 'art-ness' of language use in literature lies in the fact that the language of the literary text is patterned in a way that it substantializes the theme. For Hasan, the language of literature does not have a specific feature or characteristic; literature, from Hasan's point of view, employs the structural patterns of language as the meaning potential of society and repatterns them so that they can 'incarnate' and manifest the theme. The mere presence of so-called formal literary or linguistic devices does not make a text literary. It is through the 're patterning of the patterns' of language that the theme is substantialized and the literary work as verbal art is created. This notion of Hasan's will be clearer in the light of understanding her definition of 'foregrounding.'

FOREGROUNDING

Hasan's notion of 'foregrounding' (1971, 1985), which differs from that of Halliday's, is supposed to have added a new dimension to the systemic approach to literature and have created a more comprehensive way of tackling the literary text. Halliday (1988) has clarified the difference between his understanding of foregrounding and Hasan's definition of it.

The earliest essays in 'systemic' stylistics tended to trace in detail the patterns of prominence set up by a system from one meta-function, such as recurrent options in transitivity (ideational), marked personal pronouns (interpersonal) or thematic choices (textual), and relate these to the broad themes and structures of the literary work under scrutiny Hasan ...

was unique in covering a range of different grammatical systems. (p. 31)

As I understand, the uniqueness of Hasan's work in this regard lies in her definition of the concept of 'foregrounding' in the literary text. Since Hasan considers literature a variety of context-free language use that should convey a theme, generally speaking, all the utterances within the text function as a context for each of the single utterance in the text. In other words, since, according to Hasan (1971), "... in literary writings the 'immediate situation' corresponding to each particular individual utterance in the text does not exist physically ... in the extralinguistic universe" (p. 304), "... the immediate situation ... relevant to each individual utterance is only as it can be inferred from the utterances in the light of its function in the totality of the utterances of the text" (p. 305). A consequence of this for Hasan (1985), therefore, is that "We cannot characterize literature by reference to isolated patterns of language" (p. 94). The literary work should be seen as a whole made of language patterns, all of which contribute in a way to the substantialization of the theme of the work.

We have already learned that, from Hasan's point of view, the theme is realized in the repatterning of the patterns of language, and that the patterns of a text derive their functions from their relations with one another in the text. For Hasan, 'foregrounding' is a major technique through which the repatterning of the patterns of language is achieved. Both in the trends of the structuralist conception of contrast as the factor determining the functions of linguistic patterns and in the light of her concept of the literary text as a whole, generally speaking, Hasan (1985) regards 'foregrounding' as the result of something standing out against an established tendency. In other words, 'foregrounding' occurs in the literary text because of a contrast between some outstanding linguistic element and other elements in the text that all together establish a norm throughout the text.

We think of something as foregrounded when it stands out against an established tendency. In the two sentences I might go there tomorrow, At least I'll try, the question of foregrounding does not arise because no expectation has yet been established (p. 94)

And Hasan (1985) adds "Foregrounding would be impossible without the existence of a consistent background" (p. 95). (This is a reminder of Mukarovsky's (1964) account of literature.) In the light of this, she

concludes that it is not simply the foregrounded 'bits' that are important to the understanding of the meanings of the text, but rather the opposition that is being set up by the contrast between the foregrounded elements and those in the background in the text. And this opposition realizes itself in the structuring that recurs systematically in the whole text, the structuring that Hasan (1971) refers to as 'maximal structuring.' What the student of literature should look for is this maximal structuring in the literary text. And since this is a linguistic task, a comprehensive semantically based linguistic theory such as Halliday's systemic linguistics will be an effective tool in the analysis of the literary text.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

The present section is an attempt to show how textual linguistic reading of a literary text may result in the understanding of the work according to a single subjective knowledge category. As a matter of fact, despite the fact that literary works are the social products of different cultures, my textual reading of the selected short story will turn out to be my attempt to fit them into my previously held knowledge categories. Having arrived at some 'linguistic meaning' of the work, I will show how it can be indeterminate and shaky if the story is considered from a different angle and viewpoint.

The story chosen is "The Silence," an Australian literary work by Murray Bail (1975). It is the story of Joe Tapp, an Australian man, who has spent about a year in a camp in the desert, hunting rabbits. Norm Treloar comes in on a truck for the rabbits every fortnight and disturbs Joe's ears and 'silence.' Unable to tolerate the disturbance any more, Joe decides to hide whenever Norm appears. (See Appendix 2 for the whole text.) To show how my world view and, more specifically, my conceptual orientation has been influential in the determination of the meaning of the story, I want to present a brief sketch of both my academic knowledge and presuppositions when I began to read it within a linguistic framework. With an interest in modern English literature, which was a consequence of my undergraduate studies, I had done some studies of Existentialism put forward by Jean Paul Sartre before I became familiar with Halliday's systemic linguistics and Hasan's theory of literature. My study of that particular philosophical school had made me conscious of the role of man in the universe. According to my understanding of Existentialism, in the dumb universe of things man plays the role of a responsible agent or creature to make decisions because 'man is not a cauliflower.' This notion

was also my point of departure in the reading of the character when I sat for the linguistic analysis of the story. Thus, I believe that the repatterning of patterns of the language that I am going to detect in the work mostly tends to be a reflection of my conceptual orientation shaped by my understanding of Existentialism.

As we already know, according to Hasan's theory, the meaning, or the Theme, of the literary text is determined by a contrast between the foregrounded linguistic elements and the elements that form the background within the text. The foregrounded elements should possess some common features both formally and thematically, and should be sought at particular and thematically key points within the text. They should be looked for at special places in the text because they function as 'signposts' that lead the reader to the Theme. Once the foregrounded elements are found, their contrast with the elements in the background will reveal the meaning of the text.

On the basis of this linguistic concept, I would like to suggest that the technique of precise and detailed description in "The Silence" is a means of establishing both a similarity and a sharp contrast between things, objects and animals on the one hand and Joe Tapp, the protagonist, as an alien among them on the other. The text is an attempt to create pictures and visual images both of things and of Joe that are not unlike the close-ups in the cinema and more compatible with Jakobson's concept of metonymic language use in prose fiction (see Lodge, 1977). This technique has placed the characterization of Joe Tapp beside the description of objects and things in the story. It seems as if all have passed through a highly sensitive 'lens' to be rendered precise and made quite known and identifiable. Let us have some examples of the descriptions of both Joe and some objects. The first example is the extract that describes Joe smoking, and the second introduces the truck and Norm Treloar to the story.

His trousers were grey bags tucked in his boots. Like an overweight jockey. Only, he wore a fine singlet, a grey hat titled back. Between his fingers a cigarette rolled. He licked paper and lit it. He let smoke wander from his nose, through the hairs of his ears and head.

He [Joe] heard the truck bouncing up to him. Changing down a gear. The mudguards rattled in his ear--when it suddenly swung across his vision. A red truck with worn tyres and a spotted windscreen. The camp, silent a few seconds ago, was now thick

with noise. Two boots thudded the ground. A door slammed.
 Norm Treloar strode across, sunglasses bouncing on his nose.
 He had a friendly face. Wet sweat all down his back.

An effect of such an emphasis especially on Joe can be seen as the text's attempt to give Joe Tapp some shape or identity that makes him palpable or identifiable as the objects in the setting are. However, despite this attempt, it seems as if it is too difficult to characterize Joe Tapp. This difficulty is enacted in the description of Joe by means of both similes and his physical features and clothes. For example, Joe is *hawk-nosed* and sits like an *Aborigine, Arab or Red Indian*. He looks like an *overweight jockey* in his trousers. We, the readers, see Joe in his *white singlet and grey hat*. We become aware of his hands because they are dirty with *black mottles*. We watch his hair, nose and ears while he lets the *smoke from his cigarette wander through the hairs of his ears and head*. Thus, once the red truck with a spotted windscreen, the ants, traps, sunburnt trees, sandhills, rabbits, the sun, the sky and the ground are introduced into the story, we have no difficulty in 'seeing' them. But, although Joe is described in detail, too, the technique of 'too much' description of him and the use of similes in this connection makes it impossible to identify Joe and to have a stable and predictable picture of him. He is both 'similar' to and 'different' from the other entities, things and natural elements around him. He is 'similar' to them because he is described as other things are described in detail, and he is 'different' from them because 'Joe' seems to be a non-identified 'creature' of an unknown nature whose description demands some auxiliary entities. He is an 'alien' in the 'wilderness' of the desert and dumbness of the things and natural elements around him.

My assumption about the difference between Joe and the elements in the setting is in a way supported when, grammatically speaking, 'Mental processes' are introduced in relation to Joe to the text. This happens when Joe *decides* to escape from Norm Treloar and hide himself from his eyes. Let us observe the following extract.

This time he jumped up. Maybe two miles away the truck was sending up a cloud. He could see it over there. It was Treloar coming. *Joe had to think*. He was coming for the rabbits. Alright. But there was that noisy talk – useless. As the noise came closer *Joe decided*. He ran through the camp. Opened the door of the freezer. In singlet and hat. The bow-legged trousers. He glanced back and ran into the sandhills. He crouched behind

a bush where the camp lay just below. (my emphasis)

And the story finishes with this:

Joe decided.

Joe is no longer the 'Joe' with black mottles and cut fingers in singlet and hat and bow-legged trousers like the red truck with its spotted windscreen, the white freezer, or the wheat bags. Joe Tapp is the one that decided. This is Joe's decision that once and for all distinguishes him from his surroundings and makes him different from the things such as the white freezer as well as trees, rabbits, dingoes and whatever that has a pre-determined, identifiable and predictable essence. His decision to escape from Norm Treloar is in fact the moment he becomes a decision-making agent quite different from all the things and 'beings' around him. He shows that he has the potentiality to become 'nothing' rather than a 'being' like the things around him in his camp.²

PROBLEMATIZATION OF THE READING OF THE STORY

Seen in a broad perspective, a major common characteristic of my linguistic reading of the narrative is a tendency shown towards the examination of the character of the story according to the notion of 'people making decisions.' For me, Joe Tapp has been an individual situated in a problematic situation where he has had to make decisions to change or stabilize the conditions. My reading implies that nothing matters even in the world of the literary work under scrutiny except the character's decision making capabilities. I see this clearly as a direct impact of my conceptual orientation towards the literary texts. As a matter of fact, I believe that not only has my partial understanding of Existentialism and my previously held conceptual framework, of necessity, influenced my readings of the texts, but it has also determined my selection of the story. Having been fascinated by *Waiting for Godot*, for example, which I also studied according to my understanding of Existentialism, I selected "The Silence" from a pile of Australian short stories because I 'detected' similarities between the story and Beckett's play. The lonely setting in "The Silence" with its burnt trees and the loneliness of Joe Tapp himself reminded me of the setting in *Waiting for Godot* and the loneliness of Didi and Gogo, respectively. Also,

I found the frequent returns of Norm Treloar similar to the reappearance of Pozzo and Lucky onto the stage. Thus, it may not surprise the reader at all if he/she simply realizes that my linguistic reading of the text I have headed for the examination of the protagonist's decision making activity. This finding shows how ambiguous and baseless the achieved linguistic meanings of the text can be if the text is analyzed solely from the linguistic point of view.

Having read "The Silence" within the framework achieved through my understanding of Hasan's textual approach to the literary text, I arrived at the conclusion that in the text there is a contrast between the objects present in the setting on the one hand and Joe Tapp, the main character of the story, on the other. Relying on my outside-the-text knowledge and experience of the literary and philosophical school of Existentialism, I was eventually led to the point that the final sentence of the story, "Joe decided," put Joe in a philosophical position that made him distinct as a human being with the ability to 'decide' among the objects that could not decide. What was emphasized in this reading was the importance of a particularity (Joe's case) in conveying a 'universal' fact about man (his ability in making decisions).³ Holding the concept that there can be contrary readings of a single work and that "The Silence" is a social product, I asked a few of my Australian colleagues to read "The Silence" and give their comments on that. My colleagues are working in different areas of linguistics, too, but I do not think they are experts in tackling a literary text. Their comments showed no sign of technicality or a systematic reading of the story. They were just the readers' 'personal' reflections on the story. This was in a way important to me because I wanted to see what a non-specialized educated Australian would say about the story. One of my colleagues had a very interesting comment about the opening sentence/paragraph of the story *Joe Tapp, small-eyed, hawk-nosed, squatted like an Aborigine, Arab, or Red Indian*. She believed that it comprised a 'clumsy metaphor,' by which she referred to the similarity established between Joe Tapp and people of different races by the word *like* in the sentence.⁴ This comment had two implications to me. First, it opened up my eyes to a fact that I had not noticed before. 'Haunted' with the concept of the contrast between linguistic elements along with the Existentialist concept of the difference between 'essence' and 'existence,' and objects and Joe Tapp, I had not 'seen' that there are references to other people and races in the story. Second, I became aware of the question of the place of people from different backgrounds and especially the indigenous Aboriginal people in Australia, the people about whom I knew nothing.

The fact that there is a simile relating Joe Tapp to Arabs, Aborigines and Red Indians in “The Silence” problematizes my stylistic reading of the short story. If Joe is differentiated from things around him through assigning him the ability to ‘decide,’ an ability that is ‘deprived’ from the ‘freezer,’ ‘fine white singlet,’ ‘grey hat’ and ‘petrol drums’ so that his ‘essence’ is determined through his own decision, what would an Aborigine, Arab or Red Indian think about the use of the words referring to their racial identities? Wouldn’t they object against (my reading of) the short story by saying that they have been treated as things and objects, too? While Joe Tapp changes to ‘nothing’ through his decision, Aborigines, Arabs and Red Indians are ‘things’ from the beginning to the end. Let me clarify it more by referring to a point in the story in connection with my first reading of it. Paragraphs 4 and 5 in the story say:

Joe was doing nothing in the middle of the day. Flies rested on the back of his singlet. Briefly he looked at two ants before squashing them. He inspected the mess on the hot ground. He kept squatting in the sun. In the afternoon, far away, he heard the sound.

It could have been a fly. It was that sort of sound. Far away. Like a tiny aeroplane on a summer’s night. Only this thing was labouring: changing gears. Joe knew it was the truck. He had been listening all day for it.

I would like the reader to pay close attention to the way the truck has been introduced to the story. First, we hear a sound, which sounds like a fly, and which is also *Like a tiny aeroplane on a summer’s night*. We do not know what it is yet, however. *Only this thing was labouring: changing gears. Joe knew it was the truck*. The point that makes us almost aware of the truck before it is explicitly introduced into the story is that it ‘changes gears,’ a characteristic that makes it distinct from a fly and an aeroplane and assigns it an identity of its own to enable Joe and us to realize what the thing is. Now, in a similar vein, if the truck is introduced step by step by establishing similarities between the known objects, ‘a fly’ and ‘a tiny aeroplane,’ and the unknown (the truck) and through figures of speech such as a SIMILE, ‘Like an aeroplane on a summer’s night,’ Joe Tapp as a human agent able to make decision is ‘materialized’ in the story step by step and by being compared to an Arab or Red Indian and more specifically an Aborigine. Thus, one may simply ask: Is the function of those people of different races in relation to Joe similar to the function of the fly and

aeroplane to the truck? In other words, should Arabs, Red Indians and Aboriginal people be regarded as pre-determined 'creatures' different from and inferior to Joe Tapp, who is inevitably of a different nature? Are they 'things' and/or 'beings,' while Joe is a decision-making agent?

The observation of clause types or grammatical systems in the text in the sense that the literary effect is the result of the prominence of and/or contrast between different types of linguistic elements cannot account for the 'meaning' that might be negotiated through the text among the members of a language community because the world is more complex than to be 'defined' and 'realized' through the contrast between some linguistic elements in the text. To me, an understanding of Joe's character and his relation to Arabs, Red Indians and Aboriginal people, for example, seems too complex an issue to be sought in the closed world of the text and on the basis of assumptions and abstract readings of the text. Joe Tapp is not only a short story character but also a phenomenon that mirrors the complexity of a society and the world. Obviously, an authentic knowledge of the world will be necessary if one wants to understand the human relations in both the world society and a specific single society. Bail, the author, himself has said:

But things are far more complex than ... [to be included in a short story]. A view of the world requires much more than can be done in the short story form, which is so compressed that the slightest error will cause it to wobble and collapse. To me, the complexity of the world is the most interesting thing about it ... (cited in Sayers, 1980, p. 28).

And interestingly enough, Hutchinson (1976), an Australian critic, has commented on Bail's works, saying that "Murray Bail's point of view would seem to be that things (the world as it is) are inexplicable, and that language cannot do it justice" (p. 50). This can be taken as a suggestion that to understand a literary work the reader should go beyond the text and should consider the extralinguistic elements as well.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was primarily to question the English education within the context of Iranian universities. Considering that English is taught

through English literature and with a special attention to its language in most Iranian universities, I referred to some findings in linguistic and cultural studies to show that a solely text-bound approach to the teaching and learning of language is doomed to failure because it would lead to a limited view of the world. On the basis of the fact that textual approach is a dominant one in our universities, I tried to put into practice the notion that an objective reading of the literary text for the purpose of arriving at the linguistic meaning of it is a fiction. This was done by reading a short story within an understanding of Hasan's systemic theory of the literary text. What emerged from this practice was rewarding: It was shown how an understanding of a philosophical notion of necessity influenced my reading of the story. In other words, what I actually did while my linguistic reading of the story was fitting it into the knowledge categories that I brought with myself to the act of reading so that the story could make sense to me. Thus, instead of getting to know the world from the perspectives of other cultures (in this particular case, the Australianness of a short story), I gave shape to the text and derived my meanings from it according to a single theoretical notion that I had acquired in classroom. This should eventually support the notion that the reader's subjectivity and knowledge of the world are determining factors in the act of the linguistic/textual reading of the text. Reading the text from a different angle proved that contrary readings of the story are possible. An implication of this is that people with different cultural backgrounds and world views might understand the story in quite different and peculiar ways. This phenomenon, I believe, should in consequence question the 'truth-value' of the linguistic meanings of the texts and hence the validity of a linguistic approach to literature. We should look for more comprehensive ways of tackling the question of reading literature so that a suitable way can be found for reading literature authentically and for the purpose of getting to know the complexities of the world.

From this should emerge the necessity to reconsider the way English is taught in our universities in Iran. Everything from syllabus designing by decision-making bodies to teaching methodologies used by teachers and practitioners in classroom should be reconsidered so that, through English language teaching and learning, we can change into 'communicatively competent' people capable of experiencing a more existential understanding of one another. 'Empowerment,' from this perspective, does not any more mean the accumulation of knowledge buried in books as precious cultural products; it rather suggests enabling people to go beyond their already held presuppositions and belief systems to understand others and, in cases of

necessity, to accept and adapt themselves to their ways of behavior. 'Empowerment' in this sense means enabling people to see familiar 'things' afresh and from new angles; however, as it is shown in this chapter, textual analysis of the literary work would not lead to 'enstrangement.'⁵ Therefore, a positively formulated innovative English curriculum should not be confined to a set of certain texts and their analysis. In contexts such as Iran English literature should give way to world Englishes and literatures in English, and textual analysis of the literary work should be replaced with the techniques resulting from 'intertextuality.' From the viewpoint of this chapter, 'intertextuality' should justify the reading of the 'literary text' within the context of other 'texts' so that it may be regarded as a very small piece of the huge puzzle of the world that remains unknown to the reader/language learner. An understanding of the literary text is not sufficient for the 'empowerment' of the language learner if 'empowerment' means playing an effective, positive and balanced role resulting from an understanding of today's world in relation to others.

NOTES

1. Compare it with Leech and Short's (1991) notion of 'mock reality.'
2. The reader may realize that this is an idea that seems to be based on the western philosophy of Existentialism. As I have already mentioned above, my 'linguistic' reading of the story, therefore, reflects my partial familiarity with European existentialist writings, which of necessity has influenced my understanding of what this text means.
3. The literary meaning as a particular realization of a universal concept is the point Hasan has raised in her 1971 paper.
4. The reader may already know that this figure of speech is a 'simile'; however, I have kept my colleague's referring to it as a 'metaphor.'
5. I have borrowed the concept 'estrangement' from Shklovsky (1988), whose approach to literature is textual and formalistic and thus cannot actually fulfill what he takes to be making things strange.

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APPENDIX 1

The bushes twitched again. Lok steadied by the tree and gazed. A head and a chest faced him, half-hidden. There where white bone things behind the leaves and hair. The man had white bone things above his eyes and under the mouth so that his face was longer than a face should be. The man turned sideways in the bushes and looked at Lok along his shoulder. A stick rose upright and there was a lump of bone in the middle. Lok peered at the stick and the lump of bone and the small eyes in the bone things over the face. Suddenly Lok understood that the man was holding the stick out to him but neither he nor Lok could reach across the river. He would have laughed if it were not for the echo of the screaming in his head. The stick began to grow shorter at both ends. Then it shot out to full length again.

The dead tree by Lok's ear acquired a voice.

'Clomp!'

His ears twitched and he turned to the tree.

APPENDIX 2

The Silence

by Murray Bail

Joe Tapp, small-eyed, hawk-nosed, squatted like an Aborigine, Arab or Red Indian.

His trousers were grey bags tucked in his boots. Like an overweight jockey. Only, he wore a fine white singlet, a grey hat tilted back. Between his fingers a cigarette rolled. He licked paper and lit it. He let smoke wander from his nose, through the hairs of his ears and head.

He was alone. His camp was a spot on a huge landscape. The sun hovered above. Its heat cracking the ground white. Killing plants and grass, making trees black skeletons--good for firewood. Rabbit traps lay tangled, the tent, the tall white freezer, the petrol drums and garbage--all were scattered. Funny place for a camp. But Joe had been getting rabbits there, in the desert, for more than a year. They were burrowed in the sandhills. they came out at night.

Joe was doing nothing in the middle of the day. Flies rested on the back of his singlet. Briefly he looked at two ants before squashing them. He inspected the mess on the hot ground. He kept squatting in the sun. In the afternoon, far away, he heard the sound.

It could have been a fly. It was that sort of sound. Far away. Like a tiny aeroplane on a summer's night. Only this thing was labouring: changing gears. Joe knew it was the truck. He had been listening all day for it.

Up stood Joe. Boots squeaking above the whine of the truck. He climbed on a petrol drum. To the right the truck was making a dust storm against the sky.

He squatted down again. Nodding his head. Waiting for the man to arrive. He heard the truck bouncing up to him. Changing down a gear. The mudguards rattled in his ear--when it suddenly swung across his vision. A red truck with worn tyres and a spotted windscreen. The camp, silent a few seconds ago, was now thick with noise. Two boots thudded the ground. A door slammed. Norm Treloar strode across, sunglasses bouncing on his nose. He had a friendly face. Wet sweat all down his back.

"How'd you be?" he asked Joe.

"Not bad."

Joe realized Treloar talked too much. And he was startled by his own voice. It had jumped across the air.

"Got much?" Treloar asked him.

"About three hundred pair maybe."

"Uh-huh."

Joe shifted his weight on his feet and wondered what else to say.

Nothing.

They started throwing the shining rabbit carcasses from the freezer on to the truck. The frozen bodies clunked on to the tray. They filled the truck in half an hour.

"Well, sport! Give us a cuppa and I'll be off. I'll have to get to Kelpowie before they melt! Just got time for one cuppa."

Treloar drank two cups. he gulped and slurped, and talked about the last race meeting. In the end he climbed back into the truck.

"Well! Must be off sport! Be seeing you in a fortnight. You got your juice didn't you? And your grub? Hey, and get us more than three hundred pair next time, will yuh?"

Grinned.

Joe in singlet, boots, nodded. The truck engine roared and vibrated the camp. Throbbing Joe's ears. It moved away. He listened to the engine moaning away, threading through the saltbush. Till far away the noise died on the air. His hairy ears echoed a while. The sky and the ground waited for Joe to move.

His day started early. out of the sleeping bag, the tent, before the light. A crackling, tree-smelling fire. the billy bubbling as the sun came up. That

was the life. Orange shadows spread through the camp and coloured the sky.

He went through the sandhills in a leather coat. Over his shoulder, an old wheatbag. He walked among the sandhills parting jaws of traps, twisting necks of rabbits, dropping them into the bag. The bag grew heavy on his shoulder. He dropped the bag back at camp. Went out with another, filled three. Dropped them all back at camp. Flies buzzed. He trod back to the sandhills and set the traps again. He was hot when he finished. Off came his shirt. He wiped his neck, arms, and face. Off came his boots. black with thick leather laces. He emptied them of sand. On went the billy to the fire. It pleasantly bubbled. Black tea was poured. Drunk down. The sun burned hotter. On went his boots again. He lay back. Relaxed. Picked up the newspaper Norm Treloar had left. He dropped it in the fire. Lit a cigarette.

Those bags of rabbits sat in the sun. Those flies crawled all over the outside. Joe dragged the bags past his tent. Joe did the three bags of rabbits. He threw good meat into the freezer. He wiped his knife. After that there was nothing to do. He poked round the camp.

Then night arrived. Joe built up the fire. He was inside his sleeping bag early. His leather coat his pillow. He slept soundly. Usually snoring, sometimes grunting.

Norm Treloar arrived a fortnight later. As usual. Joe heard the truck miles away. He wondered what Treloar would talk about next. Of course, he'd say "How'd you be?" Always did. What could you about that? How'd you be? How'd you be? How'd you be? Treloar always talked. Any minute. The truck was very close. Rowdy it was, it was deafening Joe.

It stopped.

"How'd you be?" asked Treloar.

Joe had been waiting for it. But the voice took him by surprise. It seemed to float in the air a second, before tearing into Joe. And the words, strange, didn't seem to match the moving mouth.

Joe looked at Treloar. Watched him talk.

"How many you get this time?" asked Treloar.

Joe didn't know what to say. He wanted to test his voice first. Started with some words inside his mouth. He opened his mouth.

"Three hundred?" Treloar suggested.

Joe nodded.

"Say," said Treloar, "did you get that rain last week?"

Joe shook his head.

The silence made Treloar look past the truck to the dust. the scenery was dead flat.

"Yeah, is pretty dry."

Joe kept watching him talk.

"Yeah, it sure is dry," Treloar repeated.

Now Joe wanted to load the truck. He didn't want Treloar's voice coming across at him. He wanted him to get moving. Sitting there, he found himself staring at the ground. That was better than looking at Treloar's eyes watching him. He became nervous that Treloar might ask another question and force him to use his voice. There was a strain. Joe felt the whole thing, the voices on the air, strange.

Again Treloar broke the silence. He cleared his throat. uncrossed his boots, scrape, and stood upwards.

"Let's load up, eh?"

Joe helped the man, carefully.

After that, the voice leapt across to Joe.

"Look after yourself, sport. I'm off. Be seeing you in a fortnight."

His engine sent solid waves in to the air into Joe. The intruder departed. Joe began to relax. The air was left all for him. Nothing to confuse his ears.

He moved into another fortnight of trapping. Setting traps, the fire, falling asleep and waking, clearing the traps, skinning, eating. One day he chopped seven dead trees into firewood. Mostly though, after his morning's work, he did nothing. He could squat in the silence for hours, and like it. Like an Aborigine. He could plan new places for traps. He remembered seeing some dingoes near his traps.

This was interrupted. He was squatting in the sun when it happened. In his white singlet and hat. Lips slightly cracked, motionless. His hands brown, carelessly dirty with black mottles and cut fingers. That was Joe. He was touching his nose when he heard the truck.

This time he jumped up. Maybe two miles away the truck was sending up a cloud. He could see it over there. It was Treloar coming. Joe had to think. He was coming for the rabbits. Alright. But there was that noisy talk-useless. As the noise came closer Joe decided. He ran through the camp. Opened the door of the freezer. In singlet and hat. the bow-legged trousers. He glanced back and ran into the sandhills. He crouched behind a bush where the camp lay just below.

The truck was close. No tracks. It was weaving methodically. Its dust funnelled out all the way back. It broke into the camp, and revved up.

Joe saw the door slam, heard the footsteps floating faintly upwards. Treloar was walking through the camp ready to say, How'd you be? He had to look in the tent. look in the freezer. Joe could see him scratch his head. Treloar waited a few minutes, still looking. He strode back to the truck and

pressed the shrill endless horn that travelled over the dunes and past Joe's impatient head. Treloar still waited. Sat on the steel bumper-bar and smoked a cigarette. He then moved in and out of camp, looking for something. He waited some more. Then stared intently at the sandhills.

In the end Treloar started loading the meat into the truck. He finished the job. And drove away.

The stretched-out land waited for the truck. When it was gone, dust remained, suspended. The silence closed in again. Joe clambered down the hill. His camp with its familiar objects was back to normal. Now the desert-clear air was turning cold. It was time to set the traps in the sandhills. He was going to hide whenever he heard what's-his-name coming. He couldn't stand being near the talking man. Joe decided.