ANALYSING LITERATURE EXAMINATION PAPERS

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The nervous eye, patrolling these hot unhappy victims,
Flinches at the symptoms of a year’s hand teaching –
‘Flastaff indulged in drinking and sexcess’, and then,
‘Doolittle was dusty man’ and Dr Jonson edited the Yellow Book.

D.J Enright,
‘University Examinations in Egypt’,
Collected Poems (1981)

This paper will analyse the essays written by candidates to the Magister Entrance Examinations (Literature and Civilisation stream) that were held at the University of Algiers and at the University of Boumerdes at the commencement of 2003-04 academic year.

100 papers, selected indiscriminately from both universities were scrutinised. The candidates came from the Wilayas of Algiers, Tipasa, Blida, Boumeredes, Bouira, Tizi-Ouzou and may be regarded as fairly representative of the English degree graduates of the North-Central Algeria.

In this account we shall proceed as follows:

1. present the questions set by the examiners, underlining, at the same time, their pedagogical characteristics and, by implication, the kind of responses expected of the examinees;
2. assess the examinees’ linguistic competence as appears from their essays— an inescapable step, owing to the crucial role played by language mastery in reading and writing;
3. analyse the examinees’ literary competence— that for which they were examined in the first place, following, for the purpose the conventional essay outline;
4. investigate, however cursorily, the root causes of the weaknesses and deficiencies observed in the examinees’ performance.

The cultural competence for its part, which is indeed the touchstone of any student’s capacity to read ‘between the lines’ has not been analysed— owing to the discrete nature of its manifestation in an essay. We have nevertheless made the necessary inferences whenever the occasion arose and underscored its significance in the overall evaluation scheme.

On the whole we have preferred qualitative assessment to quantitative measurements and focussed on failings rather than achievements; a bias actually imposed by the reality of the situation.

And this situation is quite alarming indeed. Out of 100 candidates, only 9 were able to reach the pass mark (10 out of 20); of these, only 7 papers evidenced the capacities and
abilities required of a literary essay of the conventional kind; and out of these, 4 only displayed the competences and skills required of a potential Magister dissertation writer.

The remaining 91% were– to varying degrees– underachievers. Naturally it is on this cohort that we have focussed.

This analysis will bring to the fore the areas where the candidates’ performance is found most wanting. This will, of necessity, reflect on the learning/teaching practices of our departments of English. The conclusion will suggest, though, tentatively at this stage, possible remediation procedures pending a rethinking and redeployment of literary studies within the larger framework of the University reform now under way.

ESSAY TOPICS

A reviewing of the essay topics set for comment or discussion reveals, quite easily, the kind of knowledge and know-how– to put it crudely, that the candidates must activate in order to write knowingly, sensibly and meaningfully on the said topics.

University of Algiers

A. African Literature
   1. How far can it be said that history is a constitutive element in African fiction? Discuss with reference to two works by different writers in any genre.
   2. Influence and originality in African literature. Discuss with reference to two specific works by two different writers

B. American Literature
   1. Escapism as a form of dissent in American literature. Discuss with reference to two works in any genre.
   2. Modernism and the critique of the American Dream. Discuss with reference to two works.

C. English Literature
   1. To what extent can it be said that Shakespeare’s theatre reflects its age exclusively? Discuss with reference to two works at least.
   2. Discuss two novels– one from the 19th century and one from the 20th century– which you think to be representative of their contexts in terms of both form and content.

University of Boumerdes

1. Identify, analyse and assess the ways in which folk culture and orality give modern African literature its specificity.
2. In what ways the thematic preoccupations and stylistic innovations of the American Realists break away from those of the Romantics? Discuss with reference to two representative books.
3. Even when they are set in foreign lands and earlier times, Shakespeare’s plays show a constant preoccupation with Elizabethan and/or Jacobean England. Discuss with reference to two plays at least.

Though these essays do not require direct contact with texts, they imply, nonetheless, the candidates’ thorough engagement with specific works and specific writers. The scholarly orientation is further evidenced in the importance of context (literary, cultural, socio-
historical) which the candidates will necessarily draw on in the treatment of the subjects. This implies the candidates’ command of a set of analytical skills, such as memorization, selection, comparison, organisation. The holistic approach is undeniable, especially when one imagines the depth and scope of the methodological and even rhetorical apparatus which the candidates will call upon. As Christopher Brumfit aptly reminds us:

holistic responses which involve use of the complete set of skills that someone has developed, all the relevant knowledge, all their understanding. In traditional essay examinations, the essay response is the best example. Here the student is asked to perform in the same way as the competent critic or commentator in responding to a problem, or a text. (Brumfit, 1991: 6)

The examiners expected the candidates to display:

a) **knowledge** of the ‘Classics’ of English Literature, American Literature and African Literature; of literary-historical periods and movements, e.g. the Elizabethan Theatre, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism; national myths, e.g. the American dream; historical contexts, e.g. colonial and post-independent Africa; of the critical terminology required for the analysis of literary texts; of the basic structural elements of the main Aristotelian literary genres; ad last but not least, of the English language;

b) **attitudes** to literature, such as open-mindedness, tolerance, respect that exclude dogmatism, cultural chauvinism or moralism;

c) **skills** in critical appreciation, in the ability to put forward a balanced argument and lead it, convincingly, to its logical conclusion.

Having brought out the examiners’ expectations, we shall now move on to analysis of the examinees’ performance. As said earlier, this is by no means a detailed, statistical account.

**LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE**

Linguistic competence has already been thoroughly discussed in the first part of this progress report, notably with reference to Middle and Secondary Education. The fact is that it is still a central preoccupation, even in Tertiary Education, is clear evidence of the marked underachievement of E.F.L. education in this country.

Indeed 50% of the papers examined show serious weaknesses and deficiencies in linguistic competence—of the kind that would make them clumsy and confused, if not downright unreadable. Among such failings, the rules of **Grammar** come first—among which verb use, relative clauses, and the possessive case are most recurrent.

There is a marked tendency to use the past simple and the present perfect—indiscriminately mired with the present continuous in whatever prose register (which is in fact in tune with an irrepresible inclination to plot summarizing, as we shall see later). This complete disregard for tense agreement is equated, in terms of frequency, with a nearly systematic mishandling of relative pronouns—inevitably placed a long way from their antecedents; e.g. “Shakespeare, in *Macbeth*, does not give woman a positive status but a diabolic and negative one, who can thus defeat Man’s stronger personality.” Whose in particular is often discomposed into who his/her/his/its; e.g. “Xuma who his romance with Eliza made him aware of the impact of Apartheid on the Black people’s lives.” The possessive case, for its part, may be found in any
one of the following versions: *Mine Boy* novel, Shakespeare theatre, *Twelfth Night*’s play, the debt’s father…

Second to Grammar abusage come **lexical improprieties**. Besides misspelling, there is a series of words and phrases, probably teacher-induced, which come up with a surprising regularity and on a quite large scale; e.g. *we have*, *to tackle*, *to deal with*, *to begin with*, *to end with*, *all that*, *to emphasize on*, *to stress on*, *as far as*… *is concerned*, which obviously point to a blatant shortage of word repertory together with interferences from Arabic.

Added to this is a definite lack of critical metalanguage apart from the occasional flashing out of such words as **metaphor**, **simile**, **diction**, **characterization**, **style**, whose pertinence is generally dubious.

The impression of inarticulateness is compounded with **structural faults**. The most typical structure is that of the long-winding sentence, with no punctuation whatsoever. Here is an instance of such a compound complex sentence:

In fact, what Peter Abrahams does in his novel *Mine Boy* is to manipulate his characters to convey his views about his society which is characterized by violence injustice which are the consequences of the Apartheid system and under this system the blacks suffer a lot and they are deprived of their social rights and it is also the case of the working class which is mainly composed of black…

This sentence structure, which probably results from transfer from Arabic naturally contributes to a nebulosity aggravated by ritualistic and incantatory paragraph openings; e.g. *let us now return to…, as far as style is concerned, it is a style characterized by*…

There is also the occasional Gallicism: (“*she passes her time to weep*”); “*there is full of soldiers on the battlefield*”) which may find itself cheek by jowl with an (incorrect) Arabic sentence structure, e.g. “*Even though she looks like a man, but she does not loose [sic] her feminity.*”

This inevitably results in **semantic** confusion– quite a serious handicap even for those candidates who may ‘know’ everything about text and context. As Jane Sapiro observes:

The candidate who has the literary ability to evaluate texts may fail on the grounds of inadequate self-expression or incoherent argument. Here language abilities may become confused with literary abilities: the former are needed to do justice to the latter. (Brumfit, 1991: 48)

This break in communication– a failure in communicative competence, as we shall see presently– becomes inevitable when the candidate has very little to show in terms of literary abilities.
LITERARY COMPETENCE

Michael Stubbs’s definition of literary competence provides us with the standard of reference against which the candidates’ performance should be measured. He argues that literary competence involves:

the ability to understand several different kinds of semantic relationships: between a text and a summary of it; between different summaries; between sentences and different kinds of propositions conveyed by them; and between what is said and what is implied. These distinctions give more precise insight into some aspects of literary fiction, since a traditional concern of literary criticism is the ambiguity and multiple meanings of literary texts, and how meanings may be conveyed without having to be stated in so many words. (Carter & Burton, 1982: 71)

Alex Rodger for his part insists on reading ability as a pre-requisite to writing ability and as the cornerstone of literary competence:

the ability to read a work of literature by bringing into play the necessary presuppositions and implicit understanding of how to read and what to look for. (Brumfit, 1983: 43)

He considers it to be analogous to and based upon the more general concept of communicative competence which, according to the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, is:

the ability to create and respond to completely new and unpredictable utterances. Thus it is possible for a learner to generalise from learned patterns, to create utterances that are entirely unique; similarly, to break patterns, and to form individualised and new ones. (Brumfit, 1991: 32)

It is the ability to creatively but sensibly transfer, re-use, re-shuffle information called from set books, lecture notes and critical works which the examinees must, ideally, display in their essays. But their achievements are very wide of the work as appears from the three main segments of the essay type.

With very few exceptions, the introduction does not actually introduce the topic, i.e. state the candidate’s understanding of what is at stake, bring out the dialectical relationship that may exist between ‘sub-topics’, set out to convey, in a subtle manner, the ways in which he/she intends to go about it.

What we have instead is an opening, beginning with such ritualistic incipits as, ‘Everybody knows…’ or ‘No one can deny that…’ leading to general considerations on the socio-historical context, narrowing down to the writer-and-his works, presented in laudatory terms and eventually zooming on the topic at hand which is then either paraphrased or simply repeated verbatim. The nearest thing we get to a method is a crude advertising of the steps which the candidate purports to take in his/her treatment of the subject; e.g. ‘First I shall deal with….., secondly I shall tackle…’ etc. Another procedure (tactic?) consist I beating about the bush for a while, ‘buying time’ before suddenly ‘shunting’ the argument to some beaten track, i.e. a topic answer prepared beforehand for delayed regurgitation. This side-tracking may take the form of a blustering through (‘Before examining topicality, we’ve got to recall Shakespeare’s contribution to the birth of tragedy’) or a rhetorical plea worthy of a politician’s sophistry.
It is when we come to the **body of the essay** that we are struck by the most blatant failing, namely **irrelevance**. This is manifested in the first place in profligate plot summarizing based essentially on the candidate’s memorizing capacity. The style, smacking of the ‘York’ or Brodie’s notes’, implies no serious and prolonged contact with the text being discussed. As a rule the argument is often indebted to the literary critics and is therefore rife with unacknowledged quotations (misquotations, rather) or downright plagiarisms. Has this any thing to do with the code-switching ‘naturally’ used in the Algerian **lingua franca**? This remains to be shown. Here is, at any rate, a field of investigation worth pursuing in some further research.

Indeed the ability to synthesize information called from various sources and write on it independently is found most wanting in the essay papers. So is that ‘leading thread’ which normally runs through the argument and ends with substantiated ‘factual’ judgements, not hastily ‘scrambled’ opinions. The reader may also come up against methodological confusion, a confusion arising out of the inability to differentiate between the structural and the textual elements of a text: theme, narrative, metaphor ambiguity, for instance, are all lumped together under the non-descript hold-all dubbed ‘literary devices’.

With regard to the form, and besides the deficiencies pointed in the **linguistic competence** section, one is struck by the ‘compactness’ of the essays. The paragraph divisions are not clear-cut, transitions nonexistent. What we get instead are link words and phrase fillers, in fact, such as **so**, **however**, **on the other hand**, **as concerns** used without rhyme nor reason. If we add to this the slipshod handwriting, the total disregard for the rules of capitalisation and punctuation we cannot but admit that there is little **coherence** indeed, which renders dubious and unconvincing any conclusion that may ‘triumphantly’ or dutifully proffered at the end.

The **conclusion** is force-fed to the reader it a draught of formulæ such as ‘to conclude with’, or as a conclusion’, followed by a bolus of clichés and hackneyed phrases, all secured by the ritualistic ‘the writer has achieved his literary purpose’, eventually softened with an insipid pinch of moralizing. Little effort is made to gather the strands of the argument and end with a sense of completeness and meaningfulness. There is, quite often, no connection between the argument (laboriously) developed and the conclusion which is at times nothing but the stating anew… of the introduction!

This ‘back to square one’ movement, enlivened, now and the, with an all-purpose rhetorical flourish is indicative of the semantic disaster inflicted by scholasticism upon our educational system as a whole.

It has become clear by now that the examinees’ underachievement is the result of the combined efforts of inadequate linguistic and literary competences. But this is not the whole story. Though un-assessed here, cultural **competence** is by no means negligible in the overall picture. As John Honey observes in connection with the study/teaching of **Pride and Prejudice**:

> The social history background requires a knowledge which no foreign student can be expected to have, and for which few textbooks even attempt to cater. Central to the plot is the English law of inheritance, specifically the law of entailment, and much of the plot hangs upon completely inexplicit aspects of the legal and financial disabilities of women in this period. The English parochial system and clerical appointment by patronage involve four of the characters. Without explanation, young people are represented as having possibly eloped to Greta Green. Medical attention is sought from a doctor (called Mr) who is elsewhere referred to as an apothecary. Officers turn out to
belong not to the army, but to the militia. People travel in horse-drawn vehicles which sometimes appear as gigs, sometimes as phaetons, sometimes as carriages. People are knighted and called Sir; girls are presented at court, we meet an earl’s younger son without fortune or ecclesiastical patronage; we find husband and wife addressing each other by surname and close friends doing likewise. Every page of a text like this is a minefield of potential misconceptions and of half-understood words, allusions and social institutions. (Brumfit, 1991:116)

This is to underline at once the need for the literature syllabus to run in parallel with the civilisation syllabus; e.g. make sure that the nineteenth century social novel is matched with familiarity with the Industrial Revolution and Victorianism. This implies the existence of a teaching staff reasonably well informed about the cultural dimension referred to above. But the ‘algerianisation’ of the profession of English teacher and the brain drain that has affected the departments of English over the last decade has made this requirement hardly attainable.

The problem of cultural references raises—again— that of syllabus design, of teacher training and teaching practice. The marked underachievement of our examinees at the Magister Entrance Examination is no congenital disease. It is simply the outcome of an Academia which leaves much to be desired. As Alex Rodger reminds us:

Students will never learn to understand literature if left to themselves to read literary works in the same way as they read newspapers, magazines and textbooks. Nor will they acquire the special skills and abilities required for literary competence if their classroom role is that of mere passive receptacles for information and received critical opinion doled out ex cathedra in lectures. The fundamental purpose of a literature course should be to show how to teach students how to discover literary significance for themselves in the very act of reading. Furthermore this must be done by methods which will enable them to ‘extrapolate’, i.e. carry over and apply the interpretative principles and procedures learnt in reading one set of texts to the interpretation of others, in the same genres, which are new and unfamiliar. This implies guidance and control by the teacher, which in turn necessarily implies dialogue between teacher and student. (Brumfit, 1983: 48)

And dialogue is rather in short supply these days.

This ‘disconnectedness’ is a symptom of the rampant schizophrenia now prevailing in the country at large. More to the point, it is a clear indication of the failure of the communicative competence so loudly trumpeted in our E.F.L. educational policy.

Now, to come back to our Magister candidates. Their underachievement is the outcome of the combined effects of the deficiencies noted in the three competences considered above. Under normal circumstances, writing a credible essay is regarded as the crowning achievement of a Final year student’s formation and the test of his/her ability to embark on a postgraduate studies and research programme. Failure to do so spells dire consequences for the renewal of our teaching staff (cf. the 70% of the Magister drop-outs). Hence the urgent need to re-consider curricular policy both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The rehabilitation or institutionalisation of teacher training should be a prime consideration in this connection.
Selected Bibliography


