Evaluative comprehension for poetry with parody poems

Takayuki NISHIHARA

1. Introduction

For foreign language learners of English, it is usually difficult to comprehend English poetry. Generally, reading comprehension is divided into four levels: literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, evaluative comprehension, and appreciative comprehension (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). All four levels are important for poetry reading, but this paper specifically examines evaluative comprehension, which is difficult to address and which tends to be skipped in class.

Evaluative comprehension of English poetry is difficult for foreign language learners of English in particular because they have no background against which they can evaluate any given poem. However, this level of comprehension is necessary for poetry reading because it enables readers to enjoy the texture of a poem or the linguistic characteristics of an author (Kintsch, 1980). As Mattix (2002) pointed out, pleasure is an important element in poetry reading. The present study proposes an introductory activity for evaluative comprehension of poetry reading using parody poems: "This Be the Worst (after hearing that some sweet innocent thought that Philip Larkin must have written: 'They tuck you up, your mum and dad')" by Adrian Mitchell (2000) and "Parents" by Frank Sibley (unpublished), each of which is composed with allusion to "This Be The Verse" by Philip Larkin (1974).

2. Evaluative comprehension

Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, evaluative comprehension, and appreciative comprehension as follows:

a. literal comprehension: reading in order to understand, remember, or recall the information explicitly contained in a passage
b. inferential comprehension: reading in order to find information which is not explicitly stated in a passage, using the reader's experience and intuition, and by inferring (INFERENCING)
c. critical or evaluative comprehension: reading in order to compare information in a passage with the reader's own knowledge and values
d. appreciative comprehension: reading in order to gain an emotional or other kind of valued response from a passage (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p.443)

Richards and Schmidt (2002) define evaluative comprehension[1] more clearly in another part of their publication:

reading in which the reader reacts critically to what he or she is reading, through relating the content of the reading material to personal standards, values, attitudes or beliefs, i.e.

> going beyond what is given in the text and critically evaluating the relevancy and value of what is read. (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.134)

Consequently, evaluative comprehension involves evaluation of the textual features based on an individual background that has been developed through the reader's life including reading experience, language experience, and cultural experience. Textual features can include those of every level of language: phonological, morphological, syntactical, semantic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and cultural characteristics.

Inferential, evaluative, and appreciative comprehension are all necessary for poetry reading (literal comprehension is their common ground). Influential comprehension has been examined by Hosokawa & Schindler (2011) using an adapted text from Richard Middleton's (1912/2010) "On the Brighton Road." Appreciative comprehension has also been the focus of teaching, particularly in the framework of reader-response theory (Hirvela, 1996). This level of comprehension is nurtured in class with questions such as "What did you feel about the ending of the story?" or "Which part was most interesting to you?"

Perhaps because of its difficulty, few previous studies have assessed tasks for improving evaluative comprehension despite the importance in poetry reading. Foreign language learners are establishing their linguistic (and cultural) knowledge of the target language. As the definition above shows, however, evaluative comprehension requires them to examine various textual features of a given poem based on such knowledge. Consequently, after checking the literal and inferential comprehension of a poem, teachers and textbooks tend to skip evaluative comprehension, and instead proceed directly to appreciative comprehension.

In poetry or literature in general, native speakers enjoy specific lines, style, or "tone" of a given text based on their personal standards. Native speakers have established such bases through reading many texts written by various authors since childhood. Some compare texts written by different contemporary authors; such readers can freely discuss their likes and dislikes. Others might contrast the latest work with earlier works written by the same author and might say, "I used to like this author, but he has changed his style, and do not like his new book." These are results of evaluative comprehension of texts.

Foreign language learners of English must not only understand a given piece of poetry, but must also have a standard for evaluative comprehension. This paper makes use of parody poems which have a strong intertextual relation with their original work. In this case, the original work becomes a standard by which learners are invited to evaluate the parody poems, practicing evaluative comprehension of poetry reading.

3. Intertextuality

Parody poems are an embodiment of a linguistic phenomenon known as intertextuality. In fact, intertextuality has become an important topic in academic areas such as stylistics, critical discourse analysis, semiotics, and literary criticism (Bierman, 1993; Holthuis, 1994; Levorato, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Semino, 2009; Sweetser, 2006; Tamasi, 2001; Walsh, 2003; Wodak, 2001).

Intertextuality between stretches of language (texts) can be found in our daily language use (hearsay, puns, or hyperlinks) and literature (retelling, parodies or quotations from other literary works). According to Allen (2000), the rudiment of this concept can be found in Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas of linguistic signs (de Saussure, 1916/1972), and anagrams (Starobinski, 1971/1979) and in Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and polyphony (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin & Medvedez, 1928/1978) . However, the term intertextuality was not used until Julia Kristeva (1969/1980a, 1969/1980b) coined it in 1969 (Allen, 2002; Orr, 2003).

Since Kristeva's first use of the word, many scholars have studied intertextuality, which has made the term polysemous. Nonetheless, as Allen (2002) indicates, it is possible to classify prior studies roughly into two groups. One group includes research achievements by Structuralists such as Gérard Genette (1979/1992, 1982/1997a, 1987/1997b) and Michael Riffaterre (1978, 1979/1983, 1980a, 1980b, 1984, 1990). Generally, Structuralists are interested in "describ[ing] and thus stabiliz[ing] a text's significance, even if that significance concerns an intertextual relation between a text and other texts" (Allen, 2002, p.96). For example, Genette (1982/1997a) considers intertextuality as "a relationship of copresence of one text within another" or "the actual presence of one text within another" (pp.1-2). The other group consists of studies made by Poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes (1973/1981), Jacques Derrida (1967/1976), and Michel Foucault (1969/1977, 1971/1981). In those studies, intertextuality is regarded as an unstable linguistic or discursive property. It is impossible to trace back to the source of a specific intertextual expression. They rely on an assumption that all expressions and texts should be mutually related.

This study uses the term "intertextuality" in the Structuralist sense. As described later, readers can easily recognize the influence of Philip Larkin's poem "This Be the Verse" in both "This Be the Worst (after hearing that some sweet innocent thought that Philip Larkin must have written: 'They tuck you up, your mum and dad')" by Adrian Mitchell and "Parents" by Frank Sibley. Here, Larkin's poem is the original poem. Mitchell's and Sibley's poems allude to it strongly. Allusive texts of this type make use of the metre, lexis, or grammatical structure in the original text and add slight changes to them, which often results in an expression of the author's attitude (respectful, satirical, critical, etc.) about the original text (Nishihara (2007) called this construction "intertextual parallelism," developing Jakobson's (1966) concept of "parallelism").

This study proposes an activity for evaluative comprehension of poetry reading using texts of this type. As cited above from Richards and Schmidt (2002), learners need a "standard" with which they evaluate a given text. In the following activity, the original text is used as a standard. Then learners are invited to evaluate two parody poems based on the original poem. Of course, the process of evaluative comprehension practiced by native speakers is much more complex. However, foreign language learners have not established the firm background that is necessary for evaluation of poems in their target language. This study examines the idea of giving learners the chance to develop evaluative comprehension of poetry reading in their target language by simplifying its process for pedagogical purposes.

Although the linguistic level of the poems used for this study might be intermediate[2], teachers can plan an activity of the same type for lower level learners with linguistically simpler texts. In fact, parody poems of this kind are pervasive; teachers can find a text of an appropriate

level easily, particularly using the Internet. The poem for this activity need not be written by a famous writer. In fact, Frank Sibley, whose poem is presented herein, is an amateur poet.

4. An activity[3]

Three texts used in this activity are as follows.

This Be The Verse[4]

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
    They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
    And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
    By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
    And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
    It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
    And don't have any kids yourself.

Philip Larkin (1974, p.30)

This Be the Worst
(after hearing that some sweet innocent
thought that Philip Larkin must have written:
'They tuck you up, your mum and dad')

They tuck you up, your mum and dad,
They read Peter Rabbit, too.
They give you all the treats they had
And add some extra, just for you.

They were tucked up when they were small
(Pink perfume, blue tobacco-smoke),
By those whose kiss healed any fall,
Whose laughter doubled any joke.

Parents

They tuck you up, your mum and dad.
You may not like it, but they do.
They read old tales of good and bad
And add some variants, just for you.

But they were tucked up in their turn
With tales of fairies, castles, boats,
Their parents sang them songs to learn
No matter how it hurt their throats.

Man hands on happiness to man,	Man passes fables on to man,
It deepens like a coastal shelf.	They deepen like a coastal shelf.
So love your parents all you can	Learn them as early as you can,
And have some cheerful kids yourself.	And tell them to your kids yourself.
Adrian Mitchell (2000, p.53)	Frank Sibley (unknown)

It is readily apparent that Mitchell's and Sibley's poems strongly allude to Larkin's poem.

Learners are invited to decide individually which is a better Larkin's parody poem: Mitchell's or Sibley's. The procedure of this activity is explained below.

1. Reading the original text (namely Larkin's poem)
2. Checking the structure and content of the original text with a checklist (see Tables 1 to 7 in 4.1)
3. Reading two parody poems (namely Mitchell's and Sibley's poems)
4. Checking the structure and content of the two parody poems using the same checklist used in Procedure 2
5. Comparing the original text with the parody poems based on the results of Procedures 2 and 4
6. Discussing which poem is superior as a parody poem of Larkin's and which of them is more interesting (here, learners are required to give linguistic evidence to support their opinion based on the analysis in Procedures 2 and 4)
7. Pairing or grouping learners and having them exchange their opinion

In Procedure 2, learners establish a standard for evaluating the parody poems using the checklist. In Procedure 4, they apply the same checklist to the parody poems. In Procedure 6 evaluative comprehension is practiced based on the results of these procedures: they compare these three poems and consider which of the two parody poems is superior. Of course, no exact answer exists. The point is that learners are able to tell their partner their opinion with supportive reasons. In Procedure 7, learners are able to learn of their partner's opinion and in turn receive feedback about their own opinion from them.

4.1 *Example of a checklist for this activity*

Preparation of a checklist is helpful for learners. In fact, this activity can be quite difficult for foreign language learners without such materials even when the linguistic difficulty of poems is low. Beach (1987) emphasized the importance of guided activities when using literary texts even in their first language. The checklist helps learners understand the structure of the text and makes it easier for them to evaluate parody poems.

The content of the checklist should be selected according to the linguistic aspects in which the parody poems establish the allusive relation with their original text. In this study, the following aspects are candidates for the checklist.

Global features:
a. Title
b. Time and tense pattern
c. Demonstrative word and person pattern
d. Contrast included in the text
e. Rhyme pattern

Local features:
f. Evaluation of grandparents' generation
g. Tropes in the first two lines of the third stanza

Although the checklist presented here has already been completed, teachers must leave all or some of the boxes unfilled. Then they can tell learners to fill in the boxes by themselves.

Table 1. Title

Larkin	This Be The Verse
Mitchell	This Be the Worst *(after hearing that some sweet innocent thought that Philip Larkin must have written: `They tuck you up, your mum and dad')*
Sibley	Parents

Table 2. Time and tense pattern

	Stanza I	Stanza II	Stanza III	
			Lines 1－2	Lines 3－4
Time	present	past	general	present
Tense	present	past	present	present

Table 3. Demonstrative word and person patterns

Stanza	Demonstrative word (person)		
	Larkin	Mitchell	Sibley
Stanza I	they (parents) (third) you (second)	they (parents) (third) you (second)	they (parents) (third) you (second)
Stanza II	fools (third) they (parents) (third)	those whose… (third) they (parents) (third)	their parents (third) they (parents) (third)
Stanza III Lines 1－2	man (third but generalized)	man (third but generalized)	man (third but generalized)
Lines 3－4	you/yourself (second) kids (third)	you/yourself (second) kids (third) your parents (third)	you/yourself (second) kids (third)

Table 4. Contrast pattern

		Stanza I	Stanza II	Stanza III	
				Lines 1－2	Lines 3－4
Larkin	actors	they (parents)	fools	man	you/yourself
	those acted upon	you	they (parents)	man	kids
Mitchell	actors	they (parents)	those whose…	man	you/yourself
	those acted upon	you	they (parents)	man	kids, your parents
Sibley	actors	they (parents)	their parents	man	you/yourself
	those acted upon	you	they (parents)	man	your kids

Table 5. Rhyme pattern

	Stanza I	Stanza II	Stanza III
Larkin	"d<u>ad</u>" － "d<u>o</u>" － "h<u>ad</u>" － "y<u>ou</u>"	"t<u>urn</u>" － "c<u>oats</u>" － "soppy-st<u>ern</u>" － "thr<u>oats</u>"	"m<u>an</u>" － "sh<u>elf</u>" － "c<u>an</u>" － "yours<u>elf</u>"
Mitchell	"d<u>ad</u>" － "t<u>oo</u>" － "h<u>ad</u>" － "y<u>ou</u>"	"sm<u>all</u>" － "sm<u>oke</u>" － "f<u>all</u>" － "j<u>oke</u>"	"m<u>an</u>" － "sh<u>elf</u>" － "c<u>an</u>" － "yours<u>elf</u>"
Sibley	"d<u>ad</u>" － "d<u>o</u>" － "b<u>ad</u>" － "y<u>ou</u>"	"t<u>urn</u>" － "b<u>oats</u>" － "l<u>earn</u>" － "thr<u>oats</u>"	"m<u>an</u>" － "sh<u>elf</u>" － "c<u>an</u>" － "yours<u>elf</u>"

Table 6. Evaluation of grandparents' generation

	evaluation	Part	information used
Larkin	negative	Lines 2－4 in Stanza II	sight (clothes, manner, behaviour)
Mitchell	positive	Lines 2－4 in Stanza II	smell, positive effect on the next generation
Sibley	positive	Lines 3－4 in Stanza II	hearing (story, singing voice), sight (self-sacrifice)

Table 7. Tropes in the first two lines of the third stanza

Larkin	(1) The concretization of "misery" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), (2) a simile "like a coastal shelf," (3) a coherent downward image in the sentence "It (= misery) deepens like a coastal shelf" (the downward image of "misery" and "deepen" and the downward geographical figure of "a coastal shelf" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)), and (4) a coherent accumulative image in the sentence "It (= misery) deepens like a coastal shelf" (the meaning of "deepen" and the geographical phenomenon, namely sedimentation, occurring in "a coastal shelf").
Mitchell	(1) The concretization of "happiness" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), (2) a simile "like a coastal shelf," and (3) a coherent upward (or accumulative) image in the sentence "It (= happiness) deepens like a coastal shelf" (the semantic image of "happiness," and the geographical phenomenon, sedimentation, occurring in "a coastal shelf" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)).
Sibley	(1) The concretization of "fables" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) ("fables" here becomes literal in case it refers to printed stories), (2) a simile "like a coastal shelf," and (3) a coherent accumulative image in the sentence "They (= fables) deepen like a coastal shelf" (the meaning of "deepen" and the geographical phenomenon, namely sedimentation, occurring in "a coastal shelf").

Each learner must offer a personal opinion and reasons supporting that opinion based on the checklist. For example, one learner might say, "I think Mitchell's poem is better because it uses Larkin's tropes in the opposite sense and this might express the Mitchell's ironical attitude toward Larkin's poem." Another learner might say, "I think Sibley's poem is better because he alludes to Larkin's poem more implicitly (Mitchell's poem alludes to it explicitly in the title) but readers can understand its relation because of its conformable structure." Learners' opinions can differ if the emphasized textual features differ. Moreover, two learners with the same opinion about the better parody poem might stand on different grounds for their opinions. It should be re-emphasized that the aim of this activity is not to have learners reach agreement about which is the better parody poem, but to have learners evaluate parody poems individually based on a standard and tell other classmates both a related opinion and the reasons for that opinion.

4.2 *Further exercises*

Some further exercises might be used.

1. Development into a debate
2. Adding other relevant parody poems such as "This Be the Worst" by Benjamin Zephaniah (2001) and using three parody poems at one time[5]
3. Having learners write a Larkin parody poem
4. Carrying out the same activity with a longer text such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, which has many variant and parody texts (Zipes ed., 1993)
5. Carrying out the same activity with more implicitly intertextual works
6. Telling learners to find a pair of an original text and its parody text, and having them evaluate the parody text by themselves

As a subsidiary pedagogical implication, language awareness can be heightened using the activity presented here. In fact, learners must devote attention to various linguistic features in the texts through this activity (for example, students must pay attention to linguistic features such as tense markers, pronouns, or sound of the words as shown in 4. 1). As many scholars have discussed, language awareness is important for foreign language learning (Carter, 2003; Schmidt, 1990).

5. Conclusion

For foreign language learners of English, it is difficult to practice evaluative comprehension of poetry. Comprehension of this type, however, is an important element in poetry reading because it enables learners to experience the pleasure of reading poetry. As this paper described, it is possible to organize an exercise for evaluative comprehension using parody poems which have a strong allusive relation to their original text. Using exercises of this kind, it is possible to bridge the gap separating inferential and appreciative comprehension in poetry reading lessons.

Notes

1. Actually, Richards and Schmidt (2002) called comprehension of this type "critical or evaluative." However, this paper only uses the term "evaluative" because the term "critical" has been used in various contexts in English language teaching and applied linguistics and its meaning has become too ambiguous (Nishihara, 2010; Pennycook, 2004).
2. The author planned this activity for intermediate-level learners of English in university.
3. This activity is based on Nishihara's (2007) stylistic analysis of intertextuality in the three poems presented in this article.
4. Teachers must explain the usage of the word "fuck" as well as the phrase "fuck up" here because students may misunderstand that the use of four-letter words in English is welcomed.
5. Zephaniah's poem is as follows:

This Be The Worst

They fuck you up, those lords and priests.
　　They really mean to, and they do.
They fill themselves at highbrow feasts
　　And only have the crumbs for you.

But they were fucked up long ago
　　By tyrants who wore silly gowns,
Who made up what they didn't know
　　And gave the masses hand-me-downs.

The rich give misery to the poor.
　　It deepens as they hoard their wealth.
They'll be fucked up for ever more,
　　So just start thinking for yourself. (Zephaniah, 2001, p.30)

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Abstract

Evaluative comprehension for poetry with parody poems

Takayuki NISHIHARA

This paper presents an examination of evaluative comprehension of poetry reading using parody poems. Teachers using poetry in foreign language teaching tend to emphasize literal comprehension and inferential comprehension. They jump suddenly to appreciative comprehension. Foreign language learners have difficulty enjoying evaluative comprehension of poetry reading because they lack a firm background with which to evaluate a poetry text's textual features. Comprehension at this level, however, is important because it draws learners' attention to textual features such as the writer's linguistic style; it also enables learners to discuss the success and attractiveness of a text. Both are common topics for discussion of literary works in the mother tongue. This paper presents examination of a type of parody poems which has a strong intertextual relation with the original poem at the linguistic level, demonstrating that such poems can be useful foreign language teaching materials with which learners can evaluate poetry.