

## Incorporating Semiotic Communication into EFL Reading Classes

### Semiotik İletişimin EFL Okuma Derslerine Kaynaştırılması

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#### Abstract

The aim of this article is to apply the Semiotic Approach to reading literary texts in EFL classes and to demonstrate how to implement this approach in a classroom setting. This approach is a unified comprehensive approach based on three reading activities: reading within the text for the 'sense', reading upon the text for the 'value' and reading against the text for the 'critique'. As the approach is developed in three coherent stages, it can be implemented in line with reading classes made up of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities to make the lessons as learner-centred as possible. Both (1) how to do semiotic reading, and (2) how to incorporate it into EFL reading classes will be demonstrated.

*Key words:* Semiotics, semiotic communication, semiotic reading of literary texts, and poetry in EFL reading classes

#### Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, İngilizce'nin Yabancı Dil olarak öğrenildiği ortamlarda edebî metinlerin okunmasına uygulanan Göstergibilimsel Yaklaşımın sunulması ve bu yaklaşımın bir okuma dersinde nasıl uygulanacağını gösterilmesidir. Bu 'anlam' için metin içi okuma, 'tema'ya varmak için metin üstü okuma ve 'tenkit'e ulaşmak için de metne karşı okuma etkinliklerine dayalı üç aşamalı, bir bütün halinde uygulanan, kapsamlı bir yaklaşımdır. Bu yaklaşım bir birleriyle tutarlı üç aşama halinde gerçekleştirildiğinden, öğretmenlerin öğrenci merkezli okuma biçimini sağlamak üzere, okuma öncesi, okuma ve okuma sonrası etkinliklerinden oluşan bugünkü okuma dersleriyle uyumlu bir şekilde uygulanabilmektedir. (1) Göstergibilimsel okumanın nasıl yapılacağı ve (2) bu okuma biçiminin bu günkü okumalara nasıl uygulanacağı gösterilecektir.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Göstergibilim (simgebilim), göstergibilimsel iletişim, edebî eserlerin göstergibilimsel okunması, yabancı dil sınıflarında şiir

#### Introduction

Semiotics is a discipline rather than a science as it is hard to record observable behaviours in order to collect the data needed for further analysis in terms of signs used as signifiers in the context of the actual communication system known as 'speech' as opposed to 'language', which is a virtual system already stored in

the mind of speakers. *Speech* is thus how people use their language in a given situation to communicate their ideas, beliefs, emotions, and the like in order to express themselves properly. However, semiotics deals with all sorts of communication, as it is, in fact, the study of understanding and communication by providing a vantage point in order for us to survey our world (Kim, 1996; Hawkes, 1992; Brown, 1991; Sless, 1986).

Semiotics considers language to be a sign system used for communication; therefore, it deals with speech (written or oral) rather than language as an abstract system, since communication is the core of interaction

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actualised in a social setting. Semiotics, as a study of communication in all settings without reservation, draws on signs that turn into signifiers to refer to something existing in either the real world or the virtual world. Communication breakdown occurs somewhere in the signification process when there is a mismatch between the signifier and the signified. (Kim, 1996; Eco, 1979).

#### Literary Texts as Teaching Materials

One reason for the use of literary texts is to introduce an authentic teaching material designed for the students to develop communicative competence over a period of time. They are expected to internalise the language they are learning in order to acquire it as best they can. A literary text, a poem for instance, is very likely to be used in EFL reading classes. Semiotic reading of a literary text is given as a sample lesson to show how to make use of this approach in a typical reading class to teach the target language.

If one finds something to read, it is a text belonging to a certain type ranging from a road sign to science books or poems. A text is a production of an intellectual being with the purpose of interacting with others. The common core of a text is the deeper layer of meaning lying in the cultural background of the text, which is given through linguistic signs (words) that are organised into a number of clusters of words properly formed and laid out for the text to be coherent and cohesive in itself. The attitude of the reader is expected to be in line with the intention of the author in order for the message to be communicated effectively.

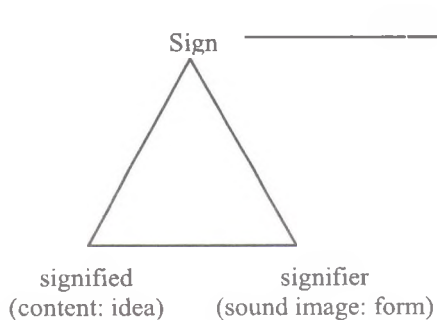


Figure 1. Saussure's model of signification process (Barthes, 1994; Hawkes, 1992; Eco, 1979)

#### Semiotic Reading as a Process Approach

In this reading approach, the format often followed in an in-class reading activity is to read constantly with the idea of improving communicative reading skills developed around a sound principle of coherent reading, often employing all the necessary abilities: cognitive, intellectual, psychomotor, conscious and sub-conscious, and the like. All the cultural codes stored in the memory with their associations, or rather references, activated by their stand-for relations come into play whenever one is involved in such an intellectual reading activity. Considering its significance to language learning in an EFL setting, this approach adds another dimension to the whole task as it challenges both teachers and learners to a considerable extent.

In the reading process readers are guided through the carefully designed stages mentioned above in order to help them improve their reading skills. Literary texts often require more effort on the part of the reader than non-literary ones as literary language contains symbolic dimensions further and beyond what is actually said. When reading to understand the sense of the text, the poem is reduced to its literal meaning through consideration of the dictionary meanings of the words used without attempting to understand the intended meaning which lies in the cultural background of the text. In the second stage of the reading process, readers are supposed to move beyond the *sense* to reach the *value* by concentrating more on how the verbal signs, namely words, turn into symbols that mean more than what they actually say within the context of the literary work.

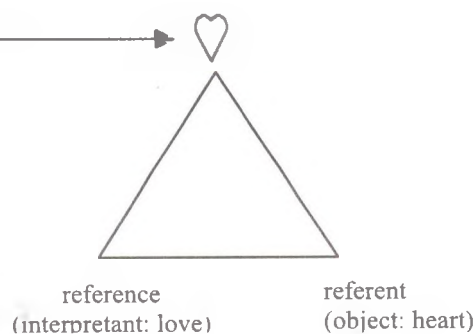


Figure 2. Peirce's model of signification

According to the Barthesian model of semiotic reading, the first stage draws more on the first order signification in which signs turn into signifiers referring to the signified already stored in the mind of readers as shared knowledge (Kim, 1996; Hawkes, 1992). In this primary order of signification readers rely heavily on the denotative meaning by reading within the text without trying to move beyond what the text possibly means. The whole process really occurs around a chain of signifiers and that of signified, often creating a sign and attributing a meaning to it. There happens to be two different sorts of signification: one initiated by the sender around a chain of signifiers (forms) and signified (content), and the other going on in the mind of the receiver (listener/reader). If the signification provided by the sender matches the one provided by the receiver, then we can safely talk about a sound communication process. If there happens to be some mismatch between these signification processes, it often requires a secondary order signification as the signs gain symbolic dimension, meaning more than what they actually say. This secondary order signification turns into a myth making process while readers move on from denotative meaning (surface/skin) to connotative meaning, lying in the cultural domain of the text concerned. In the act of reading a literary text readers are often compelled to reach connotative meaning by moving from sense to value since literary language is not crystal clear but rather opaque, often lending itself to interpretation.

#### Poetry in EFL Classes

Wordsworth defines poetry as *the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings* since poetry puts a premium on the ‘feelings of the poet’ at a particular moment of illumination when mind and body are in perfect harmony to produce a work of art (Kantarcıoğlu, 1997). He sees the source of a poem as being the inner world of the poet rather than the outer world, his own society and the whole world. The essential materials of a poem are not people or events happening in the outer world but the feelings of the poet. In other theories of the Romantic period the mind, emotion and imagination of the particular poet are of great significance when considering the origin, content and defining attributes of

poem as opposed to the outer world perceived by the senses. To some writers, poetry is identified as the ‘expression’, ‘utterance’ or ‘exhibition’ of emotion. To Shelly and Blake, *poetry is an embodiment of the poet’s imaginative vision*. Coleridge favours the organic theory as he sees the product of a poem as a self-originating and self-organizing process that begins with a seed-like idea in the poet’s inner world and develops into an organic whole with all its parts similar to each other and to the whole (April, 1997). If one wishes to put it very simply, as Coleridge defines it, *poetry is best words in their best order* (Bengi and Kurtböke, 1985, 22).

Poetry is a universal language with distinctive features organized in a particular, striking way to speak of private experience in order to reach universal values in the process of time. The language of poetry is not essentially different from that of any other literary work. The only difference is the way in which the words—*verbal signs*—are arranged in the particular context of a poem. The language of poetry is unique and multidimensional because it

- a) is used to communicate experience,
- b) is directed at the *whole* person,
- c) not only involves intelligence but also senses, emotions, and imagination.

It is for this reason that the purpose of a poetry lesson should be (1) to involve the learners personally in order to help them develop a sense of deeper understanding of human emotional and intellectual experiences for the pedagogical effectiveness of the language learning program, and (2) to expose the learners to language that is message-based rather than code-based, for it is meaning rather than the grammatical structure that should be the object of focus (Schärer, 1985). This will in turn help teachers understand that students can retain their sense of dignity while learning to sense the basic similarities of the human experience (Finacchiaro, 1988). This human experience happens to be emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

The language of poetry is deeply moving and very influential in that it focuses on all the subtle details of human consciousness when used to communicate private psychological experiences with the best words in their best order. Arp (1997, 9) puts a fine point on what poetry is, and speaks of its characteristics as follows:

- Poetry takes life as its province, focuses on all sorts of experience—beautiful or ugly, strange or common, actual or imaginary. What is interesting is that even painful experiences of man can be enjoyable for the reader when transmitted through the medium of art.
- The message is not an ordinary one. It is not written in straightforward prose but rather using poetic forms in order to arouse the interest of the reader and to be attractive to him/her.. Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature.
- It has a more definite rhythm than everyday speech does since the poet wants the reader to remember what s/he says in her /his poem. The particular rhythm of the poem is an aid to memory, so that a poem is memorized and remembered easily.
- It is like a song with an internal rhythm that makes it easy to recite.
- It makes use of figures of speech as the poet wants the reader to pay attention to what s/he says in his/her poetry in order for the reader to appreciate it accordingly.
- It is rich in vocabulary as s/he uses a much wider vocabulary range to focus on the significance of depth and variety of meaning that a rich language offers.
- It is not written to communicate information, but rather it exists to bring us a sense and a perception of life to widen and sharpen our awareness of life.

The poet uses all the resources of his/her language to communicate with the prospective reader that life has a deeper meaning. S/he feels it is his/her duty to remind people of the fact that life is so serious that one cannot simply take each day as it comes. Life goes on drawing on truth although people may dislike and pretend to ignore this for as long as possible.

#### Poetry as a Unique Code for Communication

The reader uses all his/her intelligence to understand a poem in order to appreciate it better. It is often necessary to “feel” good poetry. Once the reader feels it, then it reveals itself as the poet speaks of his personality

through the lines. If one is a good judge of people, s/he may also be a good judge of poetry. Yet, when one judges, one should do it fairly and carefully. It is not very easy to judge poetry as it means more than what it says, and says it more intensely. Miller (1978,12) foregrounds this communicative aspect of poetry, making a comparison between language as a linguistic code of communication and poetry as a code used to communicate emotions, feelings, experiences of human consciousness, thoughts, ideas, and the like as follows:

Language, though a highly sophisticated intellectual system of communication, is unable to “capture the more elusive aspects of human consciousness,” because “...socially shared conventions of language can have little value,” and “communication about private psychological experience can only be carried out by *analogy*, by *metaphor* and by *poetry*.”

Poetry, then, is the right choice to use as a teaching material if it is able to capture the more elusive aspects of human consciousness. Poets integrate all these subtle distinctions into a unified whole around literary traditions, incorporating poetic devices so that they provide an infrastructure of human communication made up of verbal signs namely words. In the act of communicating the private experiences of a poet at a particular point of illumination, poetry serves better than all other forms of literature as these verbal signs gain symbolic dimensions to express the intricacies of human communication every which way possible.

EFL programs are designed in such a way that they have their own curriculum developed around overall goals of teaching languages for communicative purposes. It is these goals that should be taken into consideration when the syllabus of each course is designed, with the primary significant objective of teaching foreign languages for communicative purposes. The common ground of language programs and poetry is the language that is their essential material. Widdowson (1979, 83) refers to this shared material as a form of communication, and the study of poetry helps develop “sharper awareness of the communicative resources of the language being learned.” This does not, however, mean that language programs should be overburdened with poetry due to the fact that it is a unique form of communication. Bengi and Kurtböke (1985) cannot help

making this point clear as they say, "What makes poetry worth studying in foreign language classes is its endless potential for classroom discussion as a highly creative and open-ended form of literature." Ibsen (1990) states that literature provides a valuable source of knowledge about civilization as it creates stimulus for expressing different opinions regarding the key points the text communicates. The text creates a medium where the reader interacts with the writer to ensure sound communication. The learner as a competent reader and an active participant is expected to be aware of the experience of a persona mediated through the poem, which turns into a universal value offered to be shared by almost everybody, regardless of nationality, colour, religion, beliefs, culture, ethnicity, traditional values and political interest.

The very first thing we do with the poem at hand is to treat it as a sound-image represented as the form rather than the content or the idea already stored in the mind of the writer and the reader as shared assumptions. The sound pattern of the poem is of great significance to the prospective reader since it conveys the meaning intended in the lines by lending itself to being actualised as a visual image.

Semiotic Reading of Literary Texts

Semiotic reading is, in fact, a process approach to the reading of literary texts developed around communicative principles in three stages: (1) reading within the text for the 'sense', surface meaning based on the denotative meaning of the words, (2) reading upon the text to interpret it for the 'value', and (3) reading against the text (the author) for the critique by putting a new centre of thought as opposed to that of the writer (Scholes, 1982, 15). The process of signification is also referred to as *stand for relation* because the reader, as an active participant in the communicative occurrence, becomes important in this model. What the reader brings to the text is as significant as what s/he finds there as s/he is actively involved in the interaction with the writer mediated through the text.

Cummings appears to be a good choice as he presents a painterly visual image throughout the poem as he paints a picture of spring with words acting out the roles

of children in their usual mood when they are on the verge of adolescence, running here and there absolutely oblivious of the potential danger symbolised by the goat-footed balloonman.

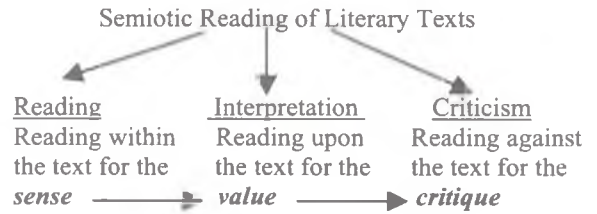


Figure 3. Semiotic Approach to Reading (Scholes, 1985)

in Just (1920, 1923)

in Just  
 spring when the world is mud-  
 luscious the little  
 lame balloonman  
  
 whistles far and wee  
 and eddieandbill come  
 running from marbles and  
 piracies and it's  
 spring  
  
 when the world is puddle-wonderful  
  
 the queer  
 old balloonman whistles  
 far and wee  
 and bettyandisbel come dancing  
 from hop-scoth and jump-rope and  
  
 it's  
 spring  
 and  
 the  
 goat-footed  
 balloonMan whistles  
 far  
 and  
 wee.

(From *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 1999, p. 2106.)

### 1. Reading within the Text for the Sense

It is just spring, and everywhere you see small ponds of water that turn the whole scene into a wonderful world for children as it is mud-luscious, so attractive for them to play with mud and water in a carefree atmosphere. There comes a balloonman, whistling his pipe far and wee as they hear him coming closer.

Eddie and Bill, who stop playing marbles and piracies, come running from their corners to join the others. As happy as they can ever be in a wonderful world, having ponds all around to give them the chance to feel a great change inside them —both physical and spiritual, perhaps. When it is spring, it is a wonderful world with ponds here and there.

Oh, Gosh, the balloonman becomes queer all of a sudden, not known to them all as he comes closer on his present evil purpose, whistling his pipe far and wee. Alas! Betty and Isabel-innocent in spirit and indecisive in manner- come dancing, stopping their plays of hop-scotch and jump-rope to join those already gathered, who seem a bit curious and hesitant, though.

It is spring, just the time, when they all feel a slow but gradual change into beautiful youth, which can be troubled unexpectedly as the balloonman turns into a goat-footed satyr with his uncontrollable lust he owns inside, capable of committing any possible sin, but anyway,

He whistles far and wee.

Turning into a small figure, hobbling as he walks along the road, disappearing far in the distance, leaving behind a group of boys and girls, not so happy as before, or rather a lot happier and more curious than ever before... who knows!

### 2. Reading upon the Text for the Value

The whole scene is no more than a picture of boys and girls playing in their corners, and enjoying their time together in the wet spring countryside till something strange but interesting happens when an old balloon-seller appears in the distance, whistling his pipe. The American boys and girls generalized as 'eddieandbill' and 'bettyandisbel' are created deliberately to give the sense that they represent the whole without reservation (Reeves, 1968, 88). The title suggests that spring is the

season that brings its own inevitable justice although there are so many acts of injustice in social life. All that exists in nature is treated the same way as they all go through a process of change in order to renew, develop and grow physically and emotionally.

The whole poem, in fact, celebrates the arrival of spring from the children's point of view as they begin to change and be aware of all those physical and emotional processes that continue in an incessant fashion (Docherty, 1995). They seem to be innocent while playing their games in their corners. The boys are playing pirates and marbles with boys, and the girls are playing hop-scotch and jump-rope with girls till 'the little lame balloon-man whistles far and wee'. Then they appear to be 'the symbol of innocence' while spring is given throughout the poem as 'a symbol of renewal'. The figure of the little lame balloonman, perhaps the best-known satyric mythological figure (a symbol of strong sexual desire) is given to add some mystery to the scene, which causes some ambiguity in terms of the surface meaning of the poem as it presents a signal of change in the scene narrated by the speaker. The deliberate use of lowercase letters in the first names of the children reveals the hint that there is this small, unhero child-like persona whose innocence prevails throughout the whole poem, creating a sort of surface meaning that conceals the hidden deviant sexual desire of the goat, the symbol of lust, forming a more sexual stance inherent in the cultural background envisioned behind the words. Landles (2001) draws on this sexual stance as it foregrounds the most significant point that Cummings makes by turning the balloon seller into a divine maypole to bring sexually separate children together in order to help them recognise the "secrets of nature", while also emphasizing the counter point that the poem's surface position of innocence is undermined by the shadow of sexual practice and adult relationships.

The world is described as puddle-wonderful, an artistic creation of a compound, to give the notion that all the children are happy, playing, running around, giving a wonderful picture of joy, conviviality, a renewal of what exists in nature, mixed up with their hopes and wishes for the future. The balloonman becomes the 'queer old balloonman' to add mystery and ambiguity to the atmosphere of the joyous innocence as

the readers begin to understand that this change will result in an unexpected happening. This change will cause trouble on their part due to the deliberate use of the 'queer', as it means 'strange' which implies abnormal sexual orientation of the balloonman. A tone of regret is introduced to form an idea in the mind of the reader, contradicting the idea of joyous renewal of nature usually associated with spring (Pollack, 1995). As girls appear to be more emotional than boys, they come dancing as if running shoulder to shoulder since their names are given as one word, *bettyandisbel*. The letter [a] of *Isabel* drops as they run so fast like *eddieandbill*, which implies their running shoulder to shoulder breathlessly (Mayo, 1947). To Cummings, this is very normal because it is 'just spring' and children enjoy what they are doing while becoming aware of all these changes that happen simultaneously. The gathering is given with a visual image in three movements: the poem first gains horizontal dimension when the lame balloonman appears and whistles far and wee, then circular dimension while boys and girls gather around the queer balloonman in the second part till he whistles far and wee and finally vertical when the goat-footed balloonMan whistles far and wee to indicate a significant change both in tonal quality and spatial orientation (even Man stands up to suggest another change in their sexual orientation) observed throughout the poem (Fellheim, 1955).

The balloonMan with capital [M] acquires an evil look as he turns into goat-footed satyr image with a panpipe whistling and proceeding slowly. The whole scene is described and defined once again with a tone of regret because Pan (the god of goatherds and shepherds) is the god of the forest running after water nymphs. Man with uppercase [M] creates new beings, promotes other relationships and adds the potential for consequences. Since the Goat Footed BalloonMan is the symbol of strong sexual desire, the theme of sexuality is introduced as a strong factor referring to the creation of Adam. By the emphasis on mud and water, growth and vitality, sexuality and propagation (becoming more in number due to a high birth rate), the poem can be read as a displacement and adaptation of the creation myth and the account of primal creation in Genesis. The loam (earth mixed with water) from which Adam was created

foregrounds the inspiring that resulted in the creation of Eve (Labriola, 1992).

The physical change is given along with the natural changes in three stages as the balloonman appears with different images. This ongoing process of change as observed while children grow to become adults during that particular period is backed up with spring when the world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful, creating a proper place for them to enjoy their lives as children. Their change into adulthood coincides with the appearance of the balloonman; the process is marked with each new image the balloonman acquires in the process of change.

This image turns into symbols in each of the stages to emphasize the process of change from innocence to awareness of sexuality as a creative power given to human beings. Mud, water, the balloonman, and the panpipe all appear to be symbols of primal creation and propagation because both boys and girls become adults with the sexual potential to ensure creation continues as a non-stop process in the whole world. It is for this reason that Cummings gives the title *in Just* using an uppercase [J] letter to emphasize that spring has the potential to start that process of change, providing equal chances for both boys and girls to become prolific entities in the process of time. In short, the central theme of the poem is that 'the innocent and wonderful world of childhood' is given in contrast to the world of adults that is a troubled world of deviant sexuality and foreboding, a feeling of evil expected to prevail sooner or later. The goat-footed balloonman depicted as a satyr image—a goat-man is the physical appearance of the Christian conception of the devil- but also as a God shepherd who oversees the well-being of his flock and encourages their propagation—appears to be the pied piper guiding and steering the children to the awakening of their childhood.

### *3. Reading against the Text for the Critique*

The reader is an active agent who is not readily conditioned to accept all that is said explicitly in the text. As the reader becomes literarily competent over time, s/he develops a unique style to create a new text around his/her own values that can very possibly be against the ones that form the common core of the

selection. The cultural background of the text often presents a hierarchy of values that may oppose the reader's societal values drawn upon religious beliefs.

When the two worlds that meet in the medium of the text appear to be completely separate from one another, the reader does not share much with the writer, and the infra structure of communication is not yet in place to offer any reconciliation. Then the reader expresses his/her strong disapproval in response to what the author communicates in the work of art.

#### Literary texts in EFL reading classes

The aim of this article is to present the Semiotic Approach to reading literary texts in EFL classes, and demonstrate how to implement it in a classroom setting to teach the target language. As the approach is developed in three coherent stages, it can be implemented in line with the ideal reading classes developed around pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities to make them as learner-centred as possible. The sort of interaction that can be maintained through the questions designed to accompany the communicative activities helps create a favourable learning atmosphere in EFL classes.

Efforts to make the class more learner-centred, however, may not pave the way to acquiring the "dimension of depth" in human universal experience expressed in literary works of art. To Earl Stevick, says Schärer (1985, 12-13), making the lesson more communicative will not of itself improve pedagogical effectiveness *unless the depth of the experience is also increased*. The danger that lies in the current trend is that much communicative methodology is concerned with "fictional pseudofacts," which make

little connection with the underlying emotions and needs of the students. A traditional, long established means of incorporating these deeper sources into learning experience of the students as intellectual and emotional individuals has been the study of literature.

When curricula are developed with the prospective audience in mind and through considering the institutional needs and the government's educational policy, courses are developed to meet such needs. The overall goals of ELT programs are set in line with these needs and learner expectations. When needs and

expectations overlap, the program is said to have reached its objectives as stated in the syllabus of each course. Courses offered in line with the curriculum to teach literature are designed around their syllabi with clearly stated objectives. They are implemented by means of materials developed to teach literary texts to non-native speakers of English with reference to current ESOL pedagogy: content-based instruction, student-centred teaching, task-based assignments, and viewing English as an international language.

In the following sample lesson learners participate in the activities designed to teach literary works in a logical sequence in order for them to develop *the dimension of depth* by going through the psychological experience of a given persona or the speaker for the sake of pedagogical effectiveness of the language program. By studying a literary text, a poem particularly, they tap the inner psyche of human consciousness to get a sense of human potentiality and investigate the elusive aspect of human consciousness. Through carefully designed communicative activities they are encouraged to acquire the target language for communicative purposes as they move from the sense—literal meaning of the text—to the value of the text, the deeper layer of meaning lying in the cultural background of the text. Figure 4 illustrates how this process approach can be applied to the reading of literary texts, keeping in mind communicative reading activities since semiotics, as the study of communication, highlights the significance of student interaction in the classroom for the sake of effective communicative skills expected to be developed in a pseudo-speaking environment. The format designed to teach literary texts to non-native speakers of English was evolved out of a module that George Bozzini co-authored with his colleague Susan Willens for the United States Information Agency's American Portfolio several years ago.

#### Incorporating Semiotic Reading into the Communicative Language Teaching Model

##### *About the Author*

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894—1962)

Edward Estlin Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894. He received his B.A. in 1915



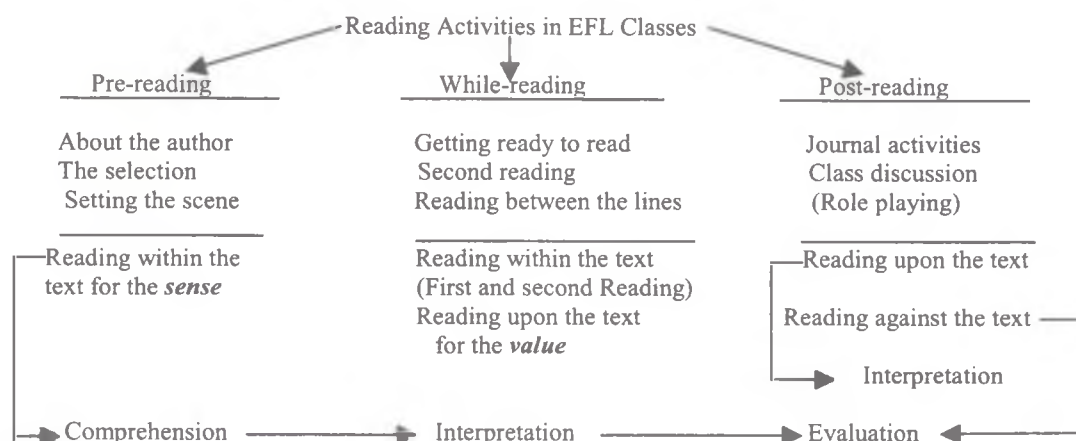


Figure 4. Semiotic Reading as a Process Approach to Literary Texts

and his M.A. in 1916, both from Harvard. During the First World War, Cummings worked as an ambulance driver in France, but was interned in a prison camp by the French authorities (an experience recounted in his novel, *The Enormous Room*) for his outspoken anti-war convictions. After the war, he settled into a life divided between houses in rural Connecticut and Greenwich Village, with frequent visits to Paris.

In his work, Cummings experimented radically with form, punctuation, spelling and syntax, abandoning traditional techniques and structures to create a new, highly idiosyncratic means of poetic expression. Later in his career, he was often criticized for settling into his signature style and not pressing his work towards further evolution. Nevertheless, he attained great popularity, especially among young readers, for the simplicity of his language, his playful mode and his attention to subjects such as war and sex. At the time of his death in 1962, he was the second most widely read poet in the United States, after Robert Lee Frost. (From *The American Poets Feb. 2001*)

#### *The Selection*

Generally a brief description of the work is given in order for the reader to predict what is likely to be found in the text. In this way, the reader develops background information that helps activate conceptual world knowledge already existing in the mind of the reader, which will in turn help the reader to appreciate the work better. Cummings draws a mental picture as well as a physical one with words expressing the playful mood of

the children in April. They play in their corners till they hear the balloon man playing his whistle. They run towards him happily and gather around him to enjoy more what they can do together. However, there seems to be a process of change they go through physically, mentally and psychologically.

#### *Setting the Scene*

This is again a kind of pre-reading activity designed to highlight key points of the work through questions of cognition requiring answers based on the personal experience of the reader. The reader as an active agent brings his/her experience to the text where s/he finds the persona's own experience drawing on man's universal values. Here are the questions that can help set the scene so that the students can form an idea as to what they are going to find in the text.

1. Can you describe a typical day you had in your childhood when there were 'puddles' everywhere? Did you enjoy playing with your friends after a downpour when everywhere was 'mud-luscious'?
2. Did you play with friends of the same sex? If not, what was the reason for your preference? Would you have done it the other way around? Do you think children still play with those of the same gender just as you may have done in the past?
3. Which of the street sellers do you think would play the role of the 'pied piper' in your childhood? Did you have any strange feelings when you saw street sellers?

### *Getting Ready to Read*

This is actually a first reading activity to enable learners to become acquainted with the text by reading it either silently or aloud depending on the text type. Read the poem aloud to get a sense of its rhythm and flow, its images and its emotions. Underline the words you do not know. Look up the words that you have underlined in the Guided Vocabulary Check or in your dictionary. The numbers in parentheses refer to the lines in the poem.

### *Guided Vocabulary Check*

This vocabulary study can be done in a number of ways ranging from multiple-choice exercises to gap filling activities (cloze exercises) or simply to giving the meaning of the words with the numbers of the lines they appear in the text.

- (2) mud-luscious: extremely attractive because there is mud all around for children to play with and enjoy.
- (4) lame: a physical handicap due to a lack of proper use of the legs
- (10) puddle-wonderful: a wonderful landscape full of puddles due to heavy rain in spring
- (20) goat-footed: a mythological satyr image, a rendition of Pan that was the god of shepherds, with strong sexual desire as he goes after water nymphs

### *Understanding the Poem*

1. What is the poem about? What do you think the central idea is? What particular experience does the speaker or the persona communicate to the reader? In what respect can this experience become a universal value?
2. The poem could be divided into three parts: lines 1-5, 6-13 and 14-24. How do time and place change from part to part?
3. How does the narrator's mood change through the course of the poem? How do the tonal quality and spatial orientation of the stanzas help diagnose the mood of the narrator? Consider how the shifting of the mood coincides with the divisions of the poem?
4. What repetitions do you find in the poem? What do they each signify?

### *Reading between the Lines*

1. Cummings introduces a balloonman that the whole poem develops around in stages along the lines. He first appears as a lame balloon man, then the queer

balloon man, and finally the goat-footed balloon man whistling his pipe far and wee.

Why does Cummings prefer to make the speaker observe such a change in the appearance of the balloon man? What does this signify?

2. Cummings creates some compounds like 'puddle-wonderful', 'mud-luscious', and also some others such as 'little lame balloonman, queer balloonman and goat-footed balloonMan. Why do you think these contrasting compounds are used by the poet? What quality do they add to the sense and also the value of the poem?
3. By means of the symbolic image of a 'goat-footed balloonman' Cummings makes use of allusion as a figure of speech. How does the identification made by this mythological allusion enrich the meaning of the poem?
4. Spring, water, mud, vitality, growth, childhood and manhood are given on purpose. What do they symbolise if you associate them with spring?
5. What do you think makes the children run from their corners and gather around the balloonman when he whistles far and wee? Is it childish innocence or sexual motive that draws them together to follow him?

### *Journal Activities*

1. Write your impressions of the poem in your journal.
2. Read your favourite journal entry aloud in class. Compare your responses with those of your classmates
3. Discuss the way you studied the poem through the activities. In what way do you think it could be made more interesting in order for you to interact with your classmates better?

### *Conclusion*

Semiotic Reading is a process approach to the reading of literary texts designed in coherent stages to help develop literary competence over time. This article investigates how this approach can be of help to those interested in comprehension, interpretation and evaluation of the texts that are highly challenging selections requiring higher order intellectual competence rather than linguistic competence only. When language

is used to express a private psychological experience of the poet, it is then literature, which is actually 'culture in action' as Valdes (1994) briefly describes it.. Language is inadequate to capture the more elusive aspects of human consciousness in order to communicate a particular experience that turns into a universal value. Poetry, as the most condensed form of literature enriched with figures of speech, is the right code to express human emotions, feelings and thoughts. Therefore, it serves as a good language learning material as exemplified in the practicum of the article by means of the communicative lesson module compatible with current EFL reading classes.

Incorporating semiotic communication serves both of the purposes without rejecting one for the sake of the other: the dimension of depth is increased through the use of literature and the use of communicative activities ensures the internalising of the target language as a system of communication. It highlights how pedagogical effectiveness of language study can be improved through a literary work of art by helping the learner increase the depth of experience, and how a learner can improve his/her linguistic performance through communicative activities based on the methodology of Semiotic Reading, a traditional, highly effective approach to the study of literature in EFL classes.

Effective learning, however, requires the combined efforts of the teacher and the learner, since the enthusiasm of the teacher and the willingness of the learner, when supported by decisive patterns of learning behaviours are of great significance for the achievement of the goals of the whole program. It is the teacher that can turn the whole experience of learning into developing a sense of perception of life on the part of the learner. It is the learner's unyielding efforts motivated by instinctive desires to learn which enables them to become effective learners while retaining their distinctive individuality and self-dignity as a private entity in the whole community. This study offers a dynamic study of language since it views learning as an on-going process of developing a perception of life.

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