Reading Literature in the Foreign Language: The Comprehension/Response Connection

by James N. Davis

What do we mean when we say that a reader has understood a text? For professionals in the field of foreign-language teaching, this question is deceptively simple. We answer it each time we assess the accuracy of our students’ restatement of the content of an assigned passage. We are alleged to know what comprehension is and to be able to teach the means to achieve it.

In this essay, I propose that the understanding of a literary text read in a foreign language consists of at least four components. First, and most obviously, it signifies the successful decoding of the literal meaning of single words and words combined into sentences. These “data” constitute the foundations of understanding. Second, the reading of much literature requires an awareness of historical-cultural referents and the spatiotemporal context in which a work was written. This type of background, which a reader is expected to bring to a text, is often referred to as “conceptually-driven,” as opposed to the first, “data-driven” knowledge source. A third requisite for comprehension, posited by Jonathan Culler, is known as “literary competence,” and consists of knowledge of “a set of conventions for reading literature” (105). For instance, awareness of genre constraints would be important when an author flaunted such conventions and used them in an original way. Fourth, understanding literature entails the reader’s unique re-creation or re-construing of the text. Through a process of individual meaning-production, readers infuse their own feelings, images, and previous experiences into the words provided by the author. Comprehension, then, signifies considerably more than a simple matching of linguistic, historical-cultural, and literary knowledge to written input. This more inclusive definition encompasses both cognition and affect.

The first three components of comprehension are and should be addressed in instruction. Yet, given the necessary emphasis on the linguistic and historical-cultural aspects of many reading selections, as well as our students’ lack of knowledge of literary conventions, how can individual responses to literature be integrated into teaching? Within such con-
strains, how can we avoid treating literature as merely another subject matter content, analogous to the content of physics or biology? How can we avoid a kind of "over-teaching" of the foreign-language literary text that does not permit genuine engagement with the work? How can we provide student readers with guidance without imposing upon them the "correct" interpretation of a text?

Responses to these questions seem to be forthcoming, given the renewed interest in problems specific to foreign-language literature reading. Over the past fifteen years, readers of the French Review have noted several articles on literature and language teaching (Catherine R. Montfort has provided an excellent survey of this discussion in a recent issue). While this dialogue within the profession has added greatly to the repertoire of useful techniques, a more fully-elaborated, theory-driven methodology may well provide needed coherence to such a project. In the remainder of this essay, I shall argue that Iserian reader-response theory suggests useful heuristics for the teaching of literature in the foreign language because of its comprehensive view of the reading process. Using recall protocol data, I shall show typical problems encountered in a foreign-language literary text, the first chapter of Voltaire's Candide, read by intermediate-level undergraduate students. I shall also propose activities that facilitate more accurate reading as well as more personal involvement with literature.

In his Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton asserts that modern critical theory can be divided into three stages: "a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years" (54). This interest in the contribution of the reader to the process of comprehension, grouping a number of theoreticians and ways of analyzing literature under a broadly based rubric, is known as reader-response (or audience-oriented) criticism. This change in focus has affected not only the practice of literary criticism but also the teaching of literature, particularly in English departments in North American universities and secondary schools. One has only to consult such journals as College English and Research in the Teaching of English to realize the extent of the influence of reader-response in discussions of literature instruction. Judging by the number of articles on the topic in such publications as French Review and Modern Language Journal, audience-oriented criticism seems to have had less of an impact upon foreign-language literature instruction. As noted above, a pedagogy that is driven by the linguistic and cultural "foreign-ness" of texts students must read is likely to accord a less important role to individual reception. Wolfgang Iser's middle-of-the-road position between the New Critical attention to the text and the audience-oriented emphasis on the reader seems theoretically consonant with such concerns. Iser characterizes the literary work as having "two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the
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reader” (Act 16). Instead of analyzing the text on one hand or the reader on the other, the object of study for Iserian theory is the “interaction between textual signals and the reader’s acts of comprehension” (Act 18; emphasis added). Iser’s thought, focusing on the reading of narratives, began to interest American academics in the seventies, and he continues to develop his theoretical position in recent essays in Languages of the Unsayable and Prospecting. Four notions from Iser’s work provide a suggestive underpinning for understanding the special conditions of reading literature, and particularly narratives, in a foreign language.

First, and obviously, Iserian theory acknowledges the primacy of linguistic knowledge as essential for entry into the reality depicted by the text. The accurate interpretation of words is the first condition for access to the literary world, whose “real-ness, unlike that of the outside world is not given” (Act 153). Most importantly, however, knowing word meanings is a necessary but an insufficient condition for comprehension and reception of the work.

Second, the words of the text constitute objectively verifiable instructions that structure the response of the reader. These instructions are combined with the individual reactions of the reader to produce a unique meaning. Thus, the reader grasps the message of the literary work only by actively “composing it.” Iser describes the phenomenon of divergent interpretations of the same work, using the analogy: “two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper” (Act 153). In this view, the words of the text are unchangeable, but individual experiences and perceptions differ. All readings, however, are not equal. Response must occur within the constraints of the textual instructions.

Third, the reality portrayed in literature unfolds moment by moment during reading and must be established through careful attention to the unfolding of the work. In contrast, a painting is immediately available as a totality to be experienced. One of Iser’s preferred images, a traveler in a stagecoach in Fielding’s novels, personifies this aspect of reading literature. The reader “[gazes] . . . out from this moving viewpoint. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey. At no time, however, can he have a total view of that journey” (Act 82). Iser calls each phase of this journey though the text a “perspective” (e.g., a change in plot, point of view, or focus on a certain character). The text is experienced as the reader’s viewpoint passes through the changing narrative perspectives.

Fourth, the passage through the various perspectives causes the reader to incorporate the text into consciousness. When this occurs, “the aesthetic effect [of reading] results in a restructuring of experience” (Act 125). For instance, readers may view actual social conditions in new arrangements.
Thus, problems that are apparently insoluble in the real world can be reconsidered in the literary one. This immersion into the world of the text obliges readers to "discover an inner world of which [they] had hitherto not been conscious" (Freud 146). For Iser, as Freund has noted, "Reading is . . . an active process of becoming conscious of otherness, as it brings about a questioning and probing of the validity of received norms and systems" (146). The result of this dynamic reader-text interaction is ultimately "an event of personal and social significance, an expansion of the self" (146).1

As previously mentioned, satisfying the preconditions for experiencing the aesthetic effect of a text is especially daunting for foreign-language readers of literature. In order to ascertain common difficulties, I asked twenty-five members of an intermediate-level (sixth-semester) French class at Pennsylvania State University to read the first chapter of Candide in French and then to write down everything remembered from the passage. Twenty minutes of class time were allowed for reading and fifteen minutes for writing. Students were not permitted to look back at the passage while completing the second part of the task. This procedure, known as the recall protocol, is the most common measure of understanding used by reading. Bernhardt, among others, has advocated the use of recall protocols in foreign-language reading research, instruction and evaluation. The protocols were written in English.2 After the recall period, class members were administered a brief questionnaire. One of the questions asked what the tone of the passage was and also provided several possible responses (Is the passage tragic, poetic, comic, dramatic, etc.?). The item was included to determine whether the students had grasped the intent of the text.3

Two typical examples of recall protocols are given below (The first chapter of Candide may be consulted in Appendix A):

1

The story was about "le baron" who lived in England and had a castle. His castle was special though because it had doors and windows unlike many others. He wanted to impress everyone with his castle.
There was a girl who was doing an experiment for a physics instructor. She was looking for the nicest castle, so she visited the Thunder-(?) castle. The man liked the girl, but she didn't like the castle and continued her quest for the nicest castle.

2

In Westphalie, in the castle of the baron of Thunder-ten-Tronckh, grew up a young boy by the name of Candide. Nature had given him the best of values. The servants of the castle were suspicious that Candide was the son of the baron's sister and a good gentleman of the neighborhood. However, she never wanted to marry.
The baron & his castle were known to be of the best. One of the castle's rooms even had tapestry (sic). The baron's wife was a very respectable woman. She had a daughter, Cunégonde, who was 17 years old. In the castle also lived Pangloss, a scholar, teacher. He taught sciences and proved that there is no causes (sic) without effect, which is why the castle, the baron, & his wife were the best. He said that everything has an end. Noses were made to hold glasses,
and we have glasses. Candide admired Pangloss & thought that Cunégonde was his cause just as she thought he was hers. One day, she was in the park, & she saw Pangloss teaching her mother’s maid. Walking back to the castle, she saw Candide & said good morning. He talked without knowing what he was saying. They both blushed. The next day after dinner, Cunégonde dropped her handkerchief on the floor. Candide picked it up, handed it to her, then kissed her hand. They got closer, their knees were shaking, & at that moment, the baron came in & chased Candide out of the castle.

The briefness of the first recall suggests that the writer understood little of the language of the passage. This impression is reinforced by errors found in the second paragraph of the protocol (e.g., “She was looking for the nicest castle, so she visited the Thunder-(?) castle”). The inferences in the second paragraph are derived more from the protocol writer’s understanding of the text than from the text itself (e.g., “she didn’t like the castle and continued her quest for the nicest castle”). While the satirical statement “His castle was special though because it had doors and windows” was reproduced accurately, most important elements of the story, including even the name Candide, were not mentioned at all.

In contrast, the student who wrote the second recall protocol doubtless comprehended much of the passage. Her protocol follows the order of events presented in the extract fairly closely. At certain points, her style seems almost storylike (e.g., the inversion “grew up a young boy” in the first sentence), perhaps reflecting some awareness of genre. This writer also remembered satirical statements from the text (In her second paragraph: “The baron and his castle were known to be of the best. One of the castle’s rooms even had tapestry (sic) . . . He said that everything has an end. Noses were made to hold glasses, and we have glasses.”). In answering the questionnaire item about the tone of Chapter 1 of Candide, however, she did not understand it to be comic, but instead described it as “poetic.” The majority of the class (including the writer of the first example), in fact, did not note the comic, satirical, or ironic tone of the passage. While many students accurately recalled a large number of ideas from Chapter 1, none of those who had not already heard of Candide (only two out of twenty-five had heard of Candide or of Voltaire!) recognized its intent.

Another indication of students’ difficulties in deriving the intent of the passage may be seen in their recall of the seventh paragraph of Chapter 1, the leçon de physique expérimentale. This important scene prefigures much of the rest of the novel in the way it employs philosophical terms to describe ironically Paquette’s seduction by Pangloss. Twelve of the twenty-five protocols contained no reference at all to this section. It is common for recall writers simply to omit text segments that are difficult to understand (Bartlett). Five others made only brief mention of it (e.g., “Pangloss is giving a physics lesson when the fair Cunégonde, daughter of Mr. Thunder-tentronkte, walks by” and, in the second protocol above, “One day she was in
the park, & she saw Pangloss teaching her mother’s maid”). None of these five students indicated awareness of the seduction of the chambermaid. Four of the remaining eight included errors in detail (e.g., “Candide watched Cunégonde while Pangloss was explaining physics to some woman” and “One day the daughter of someone, Canapolé (sic), was having a lesson from Pangloss. Candide noticed her and thought she was beautiful”). Another indication of miscomprehension is the recombination of textual elements in a way not originally intended (e.g., Candide’s presence at the leçon de physique expérimentale).

The following example is typical of the last four recall protocols:

Cunégonde was in a forest one day and heard Pangloss teaching her mother’s servingmaid a lesson in science. She listened without saying a word and became upset because she wanted to learn and be intelligent.

When the protocol is compared to the original text, it is clear that this student grasped the meaning of such elements in the seventh paragraph as “bois” (“forest”), “Pangloss qui donnait une leçon de physique expérimentale à la femme de chambre de sa mère” (“Pangloss teaching her mother’s servingmaid a lesson in science”), and “elle observa sans souffler” (“She listened without saying a word”). Yet it is likely that ignorance of the desired effect of the text led this reader to misconstrue the reason that Cunégonde was “agitée” and “remplie du désir d’être savante” (“became upset because she wanted to learn and be intelligent”). It may be the lack of understanding of a single lexical clue, such as “entre des brousailles,” led to a misinterpretation of the entire paragraph. Salvatori, in an article on Iserian theory, has termed this kind of reading “centripetal” to describe the way the reader combined only familiar elements into his interpretation, resulting in “excessive closure [and] excessive containment of alternative meanings” (10).

These examples demonstrate problems common to intermediate-level students confronted with foreign-language literary texts. First, extremely limited linguistic proficiency on the part of the writer of the first recall protocol resulted in inaccurate decoding of much of the passage. In Iserian terms, there was no possibility of entry into the literary world. Second, in the case of more proficient students, not knowing the meanings of just a few words may have led to a misunderstanding of the overall intent of the extract. Third, for other students (e.g., the writer of the second recall protocol), so much attention may have been focused on literal understanding that their reactions were not adequately guided by the intended effect of the text. Iser’s aesthetic pole, the reader’s realization of the author’s text, was absent.

One classroom activity that addresses the difficulties noted above is known as a semantic field table (Purves et al). In this exercise, which can be applied to problematic passages, such as paragraph seven of Chapter 1, students are given a blank table with categories encompassing most of the
vocabulary. One of the ways the humorous effect of this paragraph is achieved is through the contradictory use of language. The physics lesson, described in such terms as les effets et les causes and la raison suffisante, takes place, surprisingly, in a petit bois and is viewed entre des broussailles. Pangloss's student is described as a sexual object, petite brune très jolie et très docile. Certainly, experimental physics lessons rarely cause reactions as strong as those of Cunégone, who is agitée and toute remplie du désir d'être savante. As shown in the Table, the instructor can use la description physique du cadre, la description physique de la femme de chambre, les émotions and la philosophie as categories. Working in pairs, students fill in the table with appropriate words from the paragraph. Thus, successful completion of the activity leads to familiarity with the language of this passage, which is used elsewhere in the work. Through the semantic table activity and followup discussion, the class can be led to understand the actual events of the scene, as well as the satirical manner in which the seduction is masked by the philosophical terms used to describe it. This nature of this first encounter between Pangloss and Paquette, referred to later in Candide, is important for the reader to grasp and retain in order to establish the "pattern of consistency" based upon textual instructions that is necessary for interpretation of the work. Deriving the meaning in this way allows students to receive the message of the text "by composing it" through a guided and active reading activity.

Semantic Field Table
Paragraph Seven, Chapter One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>La description physique de la femme de chambre</th>
<th>La description physique du cadre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>petite brune très jolie et très docile</td>
<td>le petit bois qu'on appelait parc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Les émotions</th>
<th>La philosophie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agitée</td>
<td>une leçon de physique expérimentale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted above, when the entire text of Candide is read, a common problem is the establishment of the "pattern of consistency," described by Iser, given the sheer number of places visited and characters encountered. Story maps, blank world maps filled in by students as each chapter or group of chapters is finished, can enhance the reliability of the reader's "moving viewpoint" by encouraging closer attention to details. A grid, like the one proposed by Stalloni, can also be developed chapter by chapter to show which characters are found in which places (See Appendix B). As they
participate in this activity, students can discover that Candide is the only character present in all the chapters (although sometimes only as a listener); the minor characters tend to be linked to a place that typifies them; and, the first and last chapters are the most filled with characters.

In addition to comprehension of and attention to textual instructions, teaching should also address the fourth Iserian notion, incorporation of what was read into students' personal experiences. One way to make the plot of Candide more meaningful is through genre transformation exercises. Greenwood has suggested that students compose news items for a tabloid daily. First, they are given headlines and asked to which chapter the headline refers. Next, in pairs, they write a story based upon the headline. Finally, they may be editors for each other, giving stylistic advice and correcting errors. Three useful headlines for this activity, applied to Candide, are: "Frère de Cunégonde retrouvé par miracle," "Tremblement de terre à Lisbonne," and "La Roue de la fortune: une vieille dame passe de l'état de princesse à celui d'esclave" (Valette 62). Discussions can also focus on the differences between the genre in which Candide is written and journalistic writing. In performing this interactive exercise, student readers become student authors. They select certain elements from the original text, rearrange them and, thereby, create a new work.

Advocating a pedagogy that acknowledges the importance of individual reader's responses does not imply abandonment of literature as a field of knowledge. Rather, such teaching can stimulate interest in literary texts as objects of study. It has, in fact, been my experience that, when given the opportunity to encounter the text in this way, students are more likely to be curious about the author's life and times as well as about the stylistic devices used to produce the effects they have experienced.

The approach suggested here invites instructors to take on a new role, what Golden has called "mediating readers" (5). Teaching-mediating readers guide students to understand instructions explicitly given in the text as well as provide opportunities for individual interpretations. In this way, the instructor fosters the linking of the students' own experiences with the content of the text. A class that is also a community of readers can make the foreign literature and language more accessible and thus make acquisition of both literary and linguistic competence more natural.4

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Notes

1In another article I treated the pedagogical implications of two other important concepts from Iserian theory: indeterminacy—as manifested in the gaps in narrative perspectives—and the notion of the implied reader.

2Studies performed by Lee and Wolff strongly suggest that recalling in the target language does not provide an accurate assessment of comprehension. This is because foreign-
language productive skills may be confounded with foreign-language receptive skills when memory for target language material is also tested in the non-native language.

3From the point of view of much recent critical thinking, "objective" statements of authorial intent are of dubious validity. Certainly, the interpretation of Candide remains a controversial critical topic (see Braun, Sturzer, and Meyer for a clear presentation of some of the issues). Yet, there is universal agreement that one of Voltaire's major intents was to create a comical effect.

4Many of the concepts in this article were first presented in New Orleans at the 63rd Annual Meeting of the AATF in July, 1990. Professors Richard Danner of Ohio University and Thomas Beebe, Richard Frautschi, and Kathyrn Grossman of Pennsylvania State University provided useful comments that were incorporated into this version.

Works Cited


Appendix A. Candide. Chapter One.

You will have twenty minutes to read the following passage. You may reread the passage as many times as you wish in the twenty-minute period. You may not, however, use a dictionary, ask questions about the text or take notes. After you finish reading, you will be asked to write down in English everything you remember from the passage.

CANDIDE, OU L'OPTIMISME

TRADUIT DE L'ALLEMAND
DE MR LE DOCTEUR RALPH

CHAPITRE PREMIER

Comment Candide fut élevé dans un beau château,
et comment il fut chasse d'icelui

Il y avait en Wesphalie, dans le château de monsieur le baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh, un jeune garçon à qui la nature avait donné les moeurs les plus douces. Sa physionomie annonçait son âme. Il avait le jugement assez droit, avec l'esprit le plus simple; c'est je crois, pour cette raison qu'on le nommait Candide. Les anciens domestiques de la maison soupçonnaient qu'il était fils de la sœur de M. le baron et d'un bon et honnête gentilhomme du voisinage, que cette demoiselle ne voulut jamais épouser parce qu'il n'avait pu prouver que soixante et onze quartiers, et que le reste de son arbre généalogique avait été perdu par l'injure du temps.

M. le baron était un des plus puissants seigneurs de la Westphalie, car son château avait une porte et des fenêtres. Sa grande salle même était ornée d'une tapisserie. Tous les chiens de ses basses-cours composaient une meute dans le besoin; ses palefreniers étaient ses piqueurs; le vicar du village était son grand aumônier. Ils l'appelaient tous Monseigneur, et ils riaient quand il faisait des contes.

Mme la baronne, qui pesait environ trois cent cinquante livres, s'attirait par là une très grande considération, et faisait les honneurs de la maison avec une dignité qui la rendait encore plus respectable. Sa fille Cunégonde, âgée de dix-sept ans, était haute en couleur, fraîche, grasse, appétissante. Le fils du baron paraissait en tout digne de son père. Le précepteur Pangloss était l'oracle de la maison, et le petit Candide écoutait ses leçons avec toute la bonne foi de son âge et de son caractère.

Pangloss enseignait la métaphysico-théologo-cosmolonigologie. Il prouvait admirablement qu'il n'y a point d'effet sans cause, et que, dans ce meilleur des mondes possibles, le château de monseigneur le baron était le plus beau des châteaux et madame la meilleure des baronnes possibles.

"Il est démontré, disait-il, que les choses ne peuvent être autrement: car, tout étant fait pour une fin, tout est nécessairement pour la meilleure fin. Remarquez bien que les nez ont été faits pour porter des lunettes, aussi avons-nous des lunettes. Les jambes sont visiblement instituées pour être chaussées, et nous avons des chaussures. Les pierres ont été formées pour être taillées, et pour en faire des châteaux, aussi monseigneur a un très beau château; le plus grand baron de la province doit être le mieux logé; et, les cochons étant faits pour être mangés, nous mangeons du porc toute l'année: par conséquent, ceux qui ont avancé que tout est bien ont dit une sottise; il failait dire que tout est au mieux."

Candide écoutait attentivement, et croyait innocemment; car il trouvait Mlle Cunégonde extrêmement belle, quoiqu'il ne prît jamais la hardiesse de le lui dire. Il concluait qu'après le bonheur d'être né baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh, le second degré de bonheur était d'être Mlle Cunégonde; le troisième, de la voir tous les jours; et le quatrième, d'entendre maître Pangloss, le plus grand philosophe de la province, et par conséquent de toute la terre.

Un jour, Cunégonde en se promenant auprès du château, dans le petit bois qu'on appelait parc, vit entre des broussailles le docteur Pangloss qui donnait une leçon de physique
expérimental à la femme de chambre de sa mère, petite brune très jolie et très docile. Comme Mlle Cunégonde avait beaucoup de disposition pour les sciences, elle observa, sans souffler, les expériences réitérées dont elle fut témoin; elle vit clairement la raison suffisante du docteur, les effets et les causes, et s’en retourna tout agitée, toute pensive, toute remplie du désir d’être savante, songeant qu’elle pourrait bien être la raison suffisante du jeune Candide, qui pouvait aussi être la sienne.

Elle rencontra Candide en revenant au château, et rougit; Candide rougit aussi; elle lui dit bonjour d’une voix entrecoupée, et Candide lui parla sans savoir ce qu’il disait. Le lendemain après le dîner, comme on sortait de table, Cunégonde laissa tomber son mouchoir, Candide le ramassa, elle lui prit innocemment la main, le jeune homme bâisa innocemment la main de la jeune demoiselle avec une vivacité, une sensibilité, une grâce toute particulière; leurs bouches se rencontrèrent, leurs yeux s’enflammèrent, leurs genoux tremblèrent, leurs mains s’égarèrent. M. le baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh passa auprès du paravent, et, voyant cette cause et cet effet, chassa Candide du château à grands coups de pied dans le derrière; Cunégonde s’évanouit; elle fut souffletée par Mme la baronne dès qu’elle fut revenue à elle-même; et tout fut consterné dans le plus beau et le plus agréable des châteaux possibles.

Appendix B. Stalloni’s Story Map and Grid.

LES ETAPES DU VOYAGE
(N° des chapitres)

1. Westphalie (I, II)
2. Hollande (III, IV)
3. Lisbonne (V à IX)
4. Cadix (X)
5. Buenos-Aires (XIII)
6. Paraguay (XIV, XV)
7. Pays des Oreillons (XVI)
8. Eldorado (XVII, XVIII)
9. Surinam (Guy. Holl.) (XIX)
10. Paris (via Bordeaux) (XXII)
11. Portsmouth (Angleterre) (XXIII)
12. Venise (XXIV à XXVI)