

## SECTION 4

### TEACHING LITERATURE, TEACHING METHODS

**Ekaterina Malneva and Natalia Yuzefovich**

*Far Eastern University of the Humanities, Khabarovsk*

**Challenges of *An Experiment in Love*:**

**Personal Experiences of Teaching Students of English  
through Reading Classes**

“Эксперимент с книгой Х. Мантел “*An Experiment in Love*”:

Из опыта проведения занятий со студентами

языкового факультета

*В статье рассказывается о сомнениях и проблемах, которые возникают при чтении современной литературы с теми студентами, которые воспитаны на традиционных книгах, нередко неоправданно называемых «классикой». Один из главных “вызовов” – преодолеть скептицизм коллег. Если преподаватель пытается проникать в культуру через язык художественного произведения вместе со студентами, не боится слушать их мнение и высказывать свое – успех обеспечен. И это те принципы, которые руководствуются в своей работе авторы статьи.*

Since 2006, we have been a part of a new project “Contemporary British Literature” which makes it possible to introduce new books into the University curriculum. This paper is a result of our experience in reading and interpreting Hilary Mantel’s *An Experiment in Love*; this book is, without any doubt, one of the most controversial choices for Home Reading class.

We would like to share with EFL teachers our feelings, ideas, and the problems we faced as well as some solutions we came up with while discussing the novel.

We are sure there cannot be any other opinion but the following: *An Experiment in Love* IS a modern classic. Moreover, whilst it has

never occurred to University lecturers and instructors involved in the project to question the book's greatness, the students, as it turned out, were not all too enthusiastic enough about it.

To start we would like to recollect the stages we had to pass through to make the Project live at our University. To include contemporary books into our curriculum we had to overcome some "fences" separating them from teaching English-major students.

The first obstacle was to convince our colleagues that teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century had new goals and thus books are to be used as both reading material, and a source of culture and language. One of the reasons of this was universal: students, and sorry, colleagues, teachers too, read less and less. This is not necessarily due to the lack of interest in new books but mostly the lack of time. How time consuming is introducing a new book instead of some "classical literature" read some years ago and being re-read since then with great pleasure! Therefore, the attempts to convince most teachers failed and here experience did not matter, it was mostly in the character: only those who understood that efforts were worth trying joined the project.

Natalia's remark: My personal speculation here (as a co-author with a longer history of teaching) is that those teachers, who as students, were highly motivated by their teachers are most likely to join the project. If a teacher is bursting with energy, is not skeptical about new ideas, unusual projects, and feels comfortable with the students, the latter always benefit and most often follow this pattern in their own teaching experiences. Such teachers love the language and the culture they teach and they know that new books and new dictionaries will compensate for the lack of "live communication". Haven't you noticed how many very strict and demanding teachers "do their best" to avoid any communication with the native speaker always finding some "good" excuse like "nobody has told me", "I didn't know", etc. Only those teachers who are achievers, who really love English, who respect themselves and their students and are not afraid of being open and sincere discussing controversial issues – only they will become involved in the Project. Being a part of the Project needs a team and my team is

mostly my former students, starting with the class of 1996 and finishing so far with the class of 2007.

The second stage was to admit that we had to change our approach to reading. Sadly as it is we must confess that some EFL students of today do not cherish the so-called “literary reading”, which implies critical reading and critical thinking, reflecting, asking “wh-questions”, etc. Thus to understand books better we had to teach to read critically and think critically. Moreover, that means some pain: students, not the majority though, believe that thinking is such an activity that requires efforts and as such, it is time consuming, and most importantly, it is not fun. There are also others, more pragmatically oriented, who would rather learn some new vocabulary lists by heart than broaden their horizon by means of pondering upon certain problem questions.

In addition, facing tasks such as interpreting fiction, namely Hilary Mantel’s *An Experiment in Love*, they generally tend to find it impossible to comprehend what this is; they cannot fathom what to make of the book.

The given novel by Hilary Mantel is doubtless a challenge to both EFL teachers and EFL students no matter how proficient they may be or think they are. As the *Commentary* on the Novel edited by Karen Hewitt states, “if you can appreciate *An Experiment in Love* you will be able to cope with almost any modern English prose”. The latter quotation surely suggests the highest quality of Hilary Mantel’s writing. It is enigmatic, stimulating, and much more demanding than anything any of the students could have ever imagined. It is also a “Window” into the British culture per se. The book is ready to fill the cultural gap experienced and inexperienced readers alike might have. It also touches upon a number of urgent issues, female issues, some of which are alien to Russia and those, which are without exaggeration universal.

The next tough point was to convince students and often teachers that reading contemporary books does not necessarily mean *betraying* “classical literature”. It meant reading both classical and contemporary books as only the latter could get us inside contemporary British

world. This ultimately has been our motivation in introducing the book to advanced learners. It is no secret that until recently the basic source of reading material for educational purposes University tutors in Russia had at their disposal was reduced to what is called classical literature of the beginning of the 20-th century. Without denying these books' highly esteemed role and contribution to world literature, one cannot but agree that at the turn of the centuries an EFL teacher cannot always rely on those even if only out of vocabulary considerations. The Time, the issues have undergone considerable changes and this alone cannot be overlooked if one aims at teaching relevant language material.

This is where *An Experiment in Love* proudly steps in. Firstly, it provides an almost innumerable number of topics for reflection and digesting. Moreover, even though our attention is not focused primarily on vocabulary training as it was the case in the former USSR, still the vocabulary of Hilary Mantel is so rich, powerful and expressive that it would be unwise not to consider it and make the most of it.

As it would appear, EFL students of today are not always ready for the quality such as this. Having got accustomed to certain authors of certain literary genres dating back to the beginning of the seventies (Sidney Sheldon or Danielle Steel primarily as their reading for fun or educational purposes) they find everything else out of their reach. Moreover, no sample of post-modernistic writing has ever crossed their eye. This is exactly what we faced at the launch of the new project.

Most students seemed to resent the fact that *An Experiment in Love* is so unsentimental: the youth being eternal optimists simply find it impossible to see the darker side of Life, the perverse side of the Romance, difficult choices women have to make. To them Life cannot look as hopeless at times as it might appear to an older, more mature reader; it's certainly nothing like the love stories in Purple Prose alluded to in Mantel's novel. The greatest disillusionment for them consisted in the realization of the true meaning of the title in a sense that it actually has nothing to do with the kind of Love they aspire to, the concept of Love being somewhat completely different, not to mention

that people all in all have the vaguest idea as to what Love is in the first place.

The most amazing thing though is that when the students finished reading the book in the long run, most of the skeptics turned into ardent followers and supporters. They proclaimed they were awestruck having finally understood the grandeur of the author's purport; they found Truth beyond the multifaceted facade, that made some of them cry, some other shudder in the night; still others dream of reading more of Mantel's novels. This was all very gratifying.

Thus, we felt that our campaign for contemporary British literature has taken root and begun to flourish. It does not mean everything turned lucid and clear in an instant: as everywhere else, there were and are obstacles on our thorny path. However, the task is being carried out against all odds.

One of the main difficulties in reading and interpreting this novel is no 'classical plot' and numerous flashbacks, the complicated time pattern and the unexpected time shifts which are interwoven into a coherent whole, this Whole eluding many students. True, certain elements of the plot seem to form an intricate mosaic; there are flashbacks into the Past somewhat obscure, there abound multiple references totally unknown to an average Russian student.

The abundance of exquisite allusions and many concepts native to Britain and missing in our country's worldview make the book a challenge to a sophisticated reader. Nevertheless, smart readers are not born – they are taught.

Thus coming to the pages dealing with the things our students simply never heard of or never thought of, as the Pill and everything it relates to, we really did not know where to start. This resulted in situations when during the discussions students en masse were unable to break frustrated silence when it came to analyzing the plot or intertextual inclusions (all except one or two at the most). Failing to read between the lines, ignoring implications students used to arrive at conclusions, which obviously oversimplified the intentions of the author.

As for specifics, in some groups it would appear that most learners used to misinterpret Karina and other protagonists' actions and be

haviour. As a result, there was no unanimous, one and for all answer, whether Karina was guilty of Lynette's death or it was a tragic accident. The opinions seem to have divided haphazardly. On the other hand, this is surely one more proof of the novel being a classic – multiple interpretations.

Now that some time has elapsed, we feel that before starting the discussion of the book, its plot, and the story proper the teacher might consider introducing certain extra-linguistic topics. As outlined in the Commentary, start with presenting a small survey of what they may expect in terms of understanding Britain of the 1950-s, 1960-s and the 1990-s respectively as a background for the narration.

Probably, each class should begin with a certain introduction of the topics relevant for that part. A good idea is perhaps drawing this mental map or conceptual sphere of the British lifestyle, customs, prejudices, religion, education etc.

To boost discussion one might consider organizing classes in a way everyone could feel it is not something irrelevant or distant to their own culture like anorexia, a concept that, truth be told, few men have heard of (and since there are young men among our students, this raises a certain problem. Frankly speaking, many of them seemed rather embarrassed at first during the discussions of the most sincere and undisguised female issues. Nevertheless, as time went by, they realized that “Every man should read it for it is an insight into a woman's heart of hearts”). Instead of stressing the point that “this is a story about Appetite in its many dimensions”, about Appetite being a Metaphor just the way it is so wisely suggested in the Commentary may switch the attention to the necessary direction.

One thing we would like to warn our colleagues about the book is that it demands very good ‘teacher – student’ relations. Some pages and issues are so intimate and touchy that a formal discussion is not possible. We do not mean that you should go into details discussing some ‘naturalistic’, as students put it, episodes but that you treat your students as adults (who they are) and consider all their questions as very important and answer them wisely.

Therefore, in our “affair” with *An Experiment in Love* our students have passed from a stage of ‘no, we don’t like the book’ to the stage of love. Moreover, like in the title their love is not sexual but cultural: they love the book as it makes them think, helps them learn the culture, and gives them the feeling of the language they study. Moreover, most importantly the book shows that British or Russian women will be women. We are so far if we think about the distance between us but so close in our feelings, hopes, expectations and love.