

5 Let's interthink for the new one! Literary reading in precomposition for second language learners: dialogue with the self and with peers

Phuong Nam T. Nguyen

*"What does she imply with the ending
'a person cannot have everything in this world'?"
"After all, what did Nathalie have and lose?"*

In an EFL composition class, two students, in preparation to write in response to a short story, bring these questions into their group conversation. The questions are quite similar in meaning: reflecting the perpetual human dilemma when being faced with choices of life values. The teacher observed that their conversation about the questions was longer than she expected, with continuous talks of students about the characters, the plot, and the details. For the teacher, this was a success for the reading time in class. The students then wrote their response to the story that they had just read and discussed.

Context of learning to write in Vietnam

In English composition classes for Vietnamese undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), the genre of reader response or reaction essay to an artwork has been recently introduced and implemented in academic writing courses (in reference to the new chapter of literary response essay in the academic writing coursebook of OUP, 2019, and EFL academic writing from Cengage Learning, 2014). This new genre in the common coursebooks for EFL students follows the concept of process writing. However, like the situation of other persuasive genres, ideation before writing is limited to freewriting and forms of graphic organizers for summarizing the main points of the reading material. Not to mention the small number of ideation strategies in the field of EFL academic writing, one may assume literary reading requires another mode of text processing for better engagement and therefore comprehension.

According to custom, Vietnamese readers and learners respect the collective ideas and values embedded in a story, the proclaimed themes and values. On one hand, that serves as fostering the traditionally aesthetic values of the artwork; on the other hand, EFL learners are found less successful in identifying their own stance in the reading and then the writing. It becomes hard for them to discover the thematic points of a story and the later stages of developing the points into a well-supported paragraph would certainly not happen.

The most common approach to reading comprehension in EFL classrooms is reported as encouraging local comprehension, or accuracy-based, passive reading (Correia, 2005). “Rigid question-answer exercises” are the dominant approach for literary reading comprehension in most of the classrooms (Sa’adah & Andriyanti, 2020). The use of teacher questions in the Asian EFL context may bring the students comfort from the assurance of understanding text elements; however, one may assume the students are bound by one single dimension of true/false knowledge of the text. In the process of searching for an approach to students’ involvement in reading, I fortunately discovered the framework of two core processes of generating and discussing questions of Janssen and her colleagues (2009). In the step by step description of her framework, I found answers to my question about an approach for reading engagement. Under Tanja Janssen’s supervision, the framework has been applied to the EFL students in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. And it works: the students posed questions and shared these in their groups, as unique and creative individuals. The written responses were agreed by the teachers in the context as showing more valid inferences about characters in the fiction, wider variation in responses towards the fictions and longer response texts (Nguyen, Janssen, Rijlaarsdam, & Admiraal, 2016). The chance of reading and forming questions during reading contributes to authentic dialogues around the literary texts in classrooms; one might expect from the dialogues an improvised enrichment of ideas based around students’ experiences and understanding.

The effectiveness of the approach on local and global comprehension of literary texts

What effect does Janssen’s approach, centered around self-questioning and small-group dialogue, have on teaching students to write in response to literary texts?

For literary texts, strategies for encouraging deep reading are vital for an effective prewriting stage, since from the deep reading, readers' own associations, inferences, analogies, and ideas around the literary texts flourish (Chaffee, 2015, p. 463). The intellectual and emotional ideas of the readers as authorial individuals will create powerful input for their writing. After all, in written response to literature, to effectively support a thesis statement, students must first "develop interpretations exhibiting careful reading, understanding, and insight" (Mora-Flores, 2009, p. 83-84)

1. **Step 1. Self-questioning as an internal dialogue.** This during-reading strategy has been supported by researchers for its potential in getting students "more involved in the reading and cultivating deeper understandings" (Janssen, 2002, p. 109, in a review of empirical research on instruction in self-questioning as a literary reading strategy)

In the new lesson of writing based on reading that is presented here, I hope that the self-generated questions of EFL students will expand the reported findings of Janssen on understanding and recall of distinguishing details around a text (in reference to her study in 2002) and on students' story interpretation and appreciation (2009). The "personal ownership" of students in generating questions for literary reading should be respected: self-questioning without much guidance from teachers, for example provision of good question samples, analysis of quality and interestingness of the questions, could support, at a higher level, students' appreciation to the stories they read (Janssen, Braaksma, & Couzijn, 2009, p. 109). Questioning is a natural process for mankind. For young adult students in the EFL context, this open, unguided approach to questioning in literary reading is understandable and persuasive, because they are adults who bring their experience in life, in questioning, in problem solving to the classroom.

2. **Step 2. Discussion follows the self-generated questions as a group dialogue.** Through encouraging students to pose questions based on their own wondering and lack of knowledge or experiences, meaningful questions could be shaped and therefore authentic dialogues followed for peer interthought (Janssen, 2002).

Literature discussions with peers around the questions students form themselves increase interpretation and appreciation, in terms of depth of answers to discussion-type questions about the story, reflection of awareness

of multiple perspectives on the story, and how much students like the story (Janssen, Braaksma, & Couzijn, 2009, p. 100). In brief, for the second step of her approach, discussion around the questions with peers is necessary for students' intellectual and emotional discovery of the literary text and their appreciation of it.

Course scenario

The course presented here focuses on reading literature with two steps of dialogue: with the self and with others as a preparation for reader response writing.

Human understanding is infinite and the “ongoing process of better understanding and deeper self-appreciation” is the springboard for intellectual creativity (Naickamparambil, 1997, p. 260). Self-discovery learning, which is learner-initiated and learner-driven, is crucial for human endeavors (Hai-Jew, 2012). In second language learning, the approach of learner's own activity and enquiry is a significant advancement for personal as well as cognitive growth (Johnson, 2017). The approach to literary reading in class should invite the reader's willingness to engage with the text (Karolides, 2013, p. 6) and free exploration of a character's experiences, emotions and what happens in the fictional world (Cecil & Roberts, 1998). This is the main aim of the lesson, together with the group discussion for the collective sharing of ideas and thoughts around the questions students form in their self-discovery reading.

The story chosen for the scenario is *The Vegetarian Street Dogs*, a work by Ho Anh Thai. The language of the story is appropriate to EFL students of intermediate level. The length of five pages is appropriate for a classroom-based setting and for students for whom reading literature is assumed not to be a fascinating task. The story is narrated in the first person, a Vietnamese adult, who visited a friend in India and witnessed what happened in the connection of the vegetarian street dogs and his friend. The themes of compassion among all living creatures and the everlasting desire for living in freedom of choice of all creatures could be suitable for the young adults in an educational environment, given their psychology and their life experience.

The lesson plan

The lesson plan below illustrates reading with self-questioning as a preparation stage for students' writing composition.

1. Prereading preparation
<p><i>Whole-class question on readers' preferences</i> Students are asked for their preference in reading, e.g. how they have thought about their reading habit, why they choose a book, in what ways reading may help them in their academic and social life.</p> <p><i>Vocabulary preparation</i> Students are provided with a list of difficult words from the story. There are around 35 words selected (seven words per page). The words are chosen from the teacher's experience in working with the students at the pre-B2 level of English proficiency.</p> <p><i>Knowledge of types of questions</i> Students are provided with typical types of question, e.g. inference question, generalization question, writer's view question, as general knowledge, not specifically related to a single story.</p> <p><i>Trial questioning</i> Teacher provides students with a short fictional paragraph and calls for a collective list of students' questions on a flipchart.</p> <p><i>Psychological preparation</i> Students are encouraged by their teacher to be confident in their own ability as young adult readers; they are reassured that their questions will not be rated or judged as right or wrong. Then they are asked to note questions while reading in the margin of the printed text.</p>
2. Dialogue with the self: reading between the lines with questions formed
<p><i>Reading with self-questioning</i> The whole class is given a common task: students enter the reading process individually. They read in silence and write their questions in the margin or between the lines of the text.</p>
3. Dialogue with peers: presenting and discussing the questions
<p><i>Presenting the question</i> Students choose one of the questions that they prefer and move to the class flipchart to write their question down.</p> <p><i>Giving a star for your friend</i> All students read the questions of their peers and place a star for the question they like. This usually is a noisy and enthusing phase in the lesson, due to laughter, physical movement, and emotional reactions of students in moving back and forth to read the questions and assign stars.</p> <p><i>Dialogue with peers</i> In small groups, students then enter the stage, first, of revealing their elaborative thoughts around their own question, e.g. why they have the question, what makes them feel puzzled, whether they have their initial inferences or solutions for their question. Second, they will listen to their classmates' thoughts, answers, or comments on their questions. Students are grouped by the teacher for the factor of surprise and more connection in the classroom.</p> <p><i>To sum up</i> In a review between each group and the teacher, students talk about whether they will continue reading the authors and literary short fictions for their academic path or as a recreational activity.</p>

Final words

The first prewriting step is extremely important, especially for response writing. If the students do not feel engaged in discovering the text, then their understanding, inferentiality, their creative thinking, and their imagination which are necessary as an input for the writing will suffer. As a consequence, they may produce out-of-genre texts or purely rearticulated texts of the main surface details in the story.

Self-questioning and the discussion that followed in literary reading as a prewriting stage are expected to facilitate students' engagement with texts and reading as an authorial reader. EFL students take on the roles of both reader and writer: They read to respond and respond to be understood by the readers. It is necessary to support the students in the first role of reader for the expected success in the later stage.

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The Vegetarian Street Dogs²

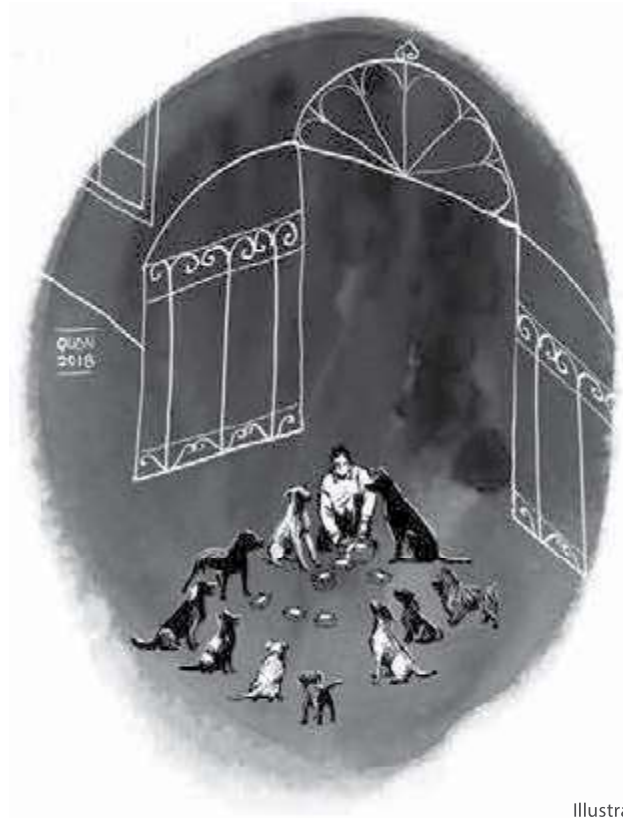


Illustration by Dang Hong Quan

Viet Nam News

by Ho Anh Thai

The street dogs of Bangalore have no owners but they do have friends. People of kindness and goodwill. My friend Ravikanth is such a man. He befriends with stray canines all over the city, his pockets always stuffed with biscuits for them. Anywhere he happens to park, get out of his car, and by chance meet a passing mongrel, he immediately gives it a biscuit.

² The story is reproduced with kind permission of the writer, Ho Anh Thai, and the editor of Vietnam News where the story was published.

He is not only a friend to the street dogs scattered all over the city. The homeless dogs who happen to live in his neighborhood often congregate at his front gate for their lunch and dinner. Exactly twenty-one of them.

Ravi has named each and every one of those dogs. But before I continue, let me fill you in, chronologically, on Ravi's back story. The first time I visited Ravikanth Shankar's house was at the end of 1993. The year before, the Shankars had helped out a destitute Vietnamese student, giving her free room and board at their house for a month, and helping her navigate the entrance procedures for a university. That student, Diep, had received an Indian scholarship, including travel expenses. It was her first time abroad, and her first time traveling by air. But when she arrived at Bangalore, there had been no one from the university to meet her at the terminal: the semester had actually begun three weeks previously. She had been standing there, helpless and sobbing, when she met Ravi, who had come to the airport to pick up a business colleague. Ravi's mother, a teacher, and the rest of his family extended helping hands to Diep. They put her up in their home and proceeded to bang on office doors for a month, fighting the bureaucracy in order to get her enrolled into a university.

Later, Diep would tell us funny stories about those first days in India when she had been so helpless and clueless, and also moving stories about how kind and accommodating to her those Southern Indian people had been. So in July 1993, I took the opportunity of an official trip I had to make to the South to meet Ravi family. They were quite friendly and spoke very openly with me. Ravi's mother led me to a room, opened the window and said: You see, this room has been kept exactly as it was when Diep stayed here. On the table was a tiny lacquer screen, consisting of the four panels representing spring, summer, fall, and winter, left there by Diep.

When I came back to visit the Shankars this time, I had not seen the family for twenty-four years. It took me four and half hours to go from Jakarta to Colombo, Sri Lanka and an hour and fifteen minutes from Colombo to Bangalore. The city had changed its name to Bengaluru and though it had been secluded and quiet in the old days, it is now teeming with cars and people. The only thing that had remained the same was the climate: it is cool and mild like the Da Lat hill station in my country. Ravi's family had also gone through changes. His parents have passed away and now Ravi, his wife Sangeeth, and their twenty-seven-year-old son, Rishab, lived in the house.

At the doorstep, Sangeeth — who is an artist — had created colored chalk designs of flowers and leaves. I had to step on her work in order to enter and accept the customary Indian welcome for a noble guest. Sangeeth came forward with a bowl of *ghee*, the purified butter that fueled sacred lamps,

and waved it in circles before me, following the Indian custom of driving away the demons and bestowing good fortune on a guest. Their son Rishab put a garland of flowers and a shawl around my neck, another customary way of drawing luck to guests.

As these simple and friendly ceremonies continued, I felt something large and heavy rubbing against my leg. I looked down. A black dog, as big as a calf, was going through its own welcoming ceremony for me. I found out later that he was the only dog that actually belonged to the family. At the same time, several brown and a yellow dogs pushed through the front gate, wagging their tails. The black dog barked at them loudly, as if to drive them away. Stop it, don't be jealous, Ravi said to him. Be polite and let them come in for a little while to welcome my guest.

Later, Ravi took me to visit the institutions run by his family. The education center was founded by his mother, Mrs. Vimala Shankar, in 1957 with only four female students at the beginning. It has now grown to 1600 students, with classes ranging from kindergarten to college. The college enrolls 350 students in the natural and social sciences. After his mother had passed away, Sangeeth became president of the institutions and Ravi and their son Rishab are members of the managing committee, with Ravi as the committee secretary.

A red carpet had been spread for me, from the front gate to inside the entrance. I bowed to the copper statue of Mrs. Vimala Shankar there, remembering the day she showed me the room where the Vietnamese girl had stayed and said to me: See, it has been kept exactly as it had been when Diep stayed here.

Afterwards, we returned to Ravi's house. It was dinner time, and the tribe of street dogs had gathered at the front gate. A big pot of milk rice was brought out and Ravi ladled the contents into plastic boxes lined up at the gate: one box for each dog. Each even had his or her own name. Tony, a hefty lad. Daisy, an elegant girl. Mr. Brown, most certainly a gentleman with brown fur. Chikki, a meddlesome little girl. And Doey, Stanislaus, Joe, Sam, Cheenu, Tito, Robin, Durwas, Princey, Rani, Cutie, Spotty, Sarge, Cop, Anu, John, and Nick.

Initially, the black dog would not accept them. A pampered domestic dog, he arrogantly drove away the strays. Ravi had to scold him, lecture him about his attitude and instruct him how to conduct himself. Gradually Blackie learned to restrain his annoyance. Ravi, in the meantime, taught the street dogs to behave with respect and discipline. When Robin, for example, stuck his snout into Cutie's box and shoved her away, Ravi rebuked him. A deluge of reprimand poured down on Robin and then Ravi confiscated

Robin's rice box. Tears filled Robin's eyes. Only then did Ravi return the rice box to him. Seeing that the master had cooled down, Robin got mischievous again and rubbed up against Ravi's calf, always finding ways to jostle the other dogs away from their master.

As for the food for these dogs, Ravi bought bags of dog biscuits and had his cook prepare rice with milk. Everything was vegetarian. And since the master was a vegetarian, the dogs had to be vegetarian also. Pet dogs in Vietnam eat about a hundred milligrams of beef a day, while dogs in India eat only milk rice and vegetarian biscuits. Diep told me that in 1992 when she stayed in Ravi's house and ate with his family, she went vegetarian for a month. One time she was about to cook some Vietnamese instant noodles in the kitchen, but seeing the illustration of prawns on the package, Ravi said that prawns were also animals and she couldn't cook them in his kitchen. Ravi had been a vegetarian from the time he left his mother's womb.

The tradition of vegetarianism began during the time of Buddha and then influenced Hinduism, resulting today in the existence of almost a billion vegetarians in India. Because of that same belief, Indian pets are also vegetarian. The vegetarians do not follow that diet for health reasons or because they have allergies to certain foods and fear meat – though someone would vomit whenever they see meat and fish dishes. They are vegetarians because they follow a philosophy of non-violence and refuse to participate in the process of killing any living being.

Does the presence of a pack of dogs wandering all over the streets and gathering at the Shankars' front gate ever make the neighbors uncomfortable? Yes. Sometimes. It isn't that they are annoyed at their neighbor feeding strays, only that sometimes the dogs get into fights with each other and bark up a racket. Ravi then has to apologize, which usually satisfies his neighbors. But sometimes even his wife questions his behavior: her husband leaves food on their rooftop terrace for the monkeys and peacocks who are now frequent visitors. You've turned our house into a zoo, Sangeeth told him.

For the last six years, Ravi hasn't even been able to leave town on job-related travel. A mechanical engineer, he worked for Swiss and Korean companies before establishing his own IT company. In addition, after his mother passed away at the age of eighty, while in the middle of teaching a class, he began to manage his family's educational institutions. It was a return to the family business for him, and now his wife and his son have joined him in that career.

One might worry that if Ravi had to go away for a few days, the dogs would be helpless. There was a time when Ravi didn't see Rani for two days and worried that something had befallen her. The name Rani means "queen"

and he ordered the rest of the pack to search for their queen. It turned out she was sick and lay in a corner of the Rose Garden, the Lal Bagh. Ravi took her to a veterinarian, who told him that he only treated household pets and never street dogs. Then here's your chance, Ravi told him. A doctor could not refuse to treat even one of the wandering urchins who hawked newspapers with the excuse that such a boy was homeless.

In the end, Ravi and the veterinarian became friends. Every year Ravi bought twenty-one anti-rabies shots from him. Stand still, Ravi would say, as he patted each dog. This will just take a second and it won't hurt, he reassured them as he stuck the syringe into their hindquarters. Each dog would cringe and bark, but they would stand still and let Ravi give them the injections. Only the mischievous Robin ran away. Looking back from a safe distance, he wagged his tail, as if teasing Ravi. Ravi disciplined him by withholding his food that day, and reprimanding him. The next morning, Robin let Ravi give him a shot.

One of the neighbors wondered why Ravi, who was so close to the dogs, didn't just build a cage in his house and keep them there. No, Ravi said; it's like those roving newspaper boys in the street, if they were put into a re-education camp and given plenty of full meals, they would still run away after several days. They are the free sons of the streets. They need freedom above all.

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One time, the dogs became confused and worried.

They had not seen Ravi going out of his house for two days. At meal time, only the lady cook brought the milk rice out and ladled it into their boxes. That part seemed normal to the dogs because every day the cook helped Ravi to do it. However, it was not normal that Ravi didn't go out.

The dogs rubbed against the iron gate. They peered through the lattice-work vertical and horizontal bars to see what was happening in the house. Blackie, the house dog, came out to drive them away. Go away, you guys, the master isn't coming out today. Why not, they demanded, but Blackie resolutely refused to give information. Just go away, he barked and drove them out.

And so the situation remained for four days, until the dogs could bear it no longer. They were confused. They questioned themselves. They worried. What was wrong with the master? They barked and howled incessantly. The whole street was disturbed. Blackie ran out to bark at them. Yes, we are sorry, they howled back, but how is our master, what's wrong with him?

What was wrong with Ravi was the flu. His doctor had insisted he remain on bed rest and not go out into the wind. The four days had passed, and it seemed the dogs had mounted a protest demonstration at the front.

Finally Ravi let them come in to visit him.

One after one they were led in by the cook. Playing the role of domestic dog, Blackie escorted and monitored them, constantly reminding them to behave in accordance with the house rules. It was their first time these street dogs had been permitted to enter the domicile of a respectable family and they had to act accordingly.

One by one, they came in. Came to the side of Ravi's bed. He was still tired, but he had to pat the head of each dog, telling them behave themselves and not to worry, in a few days later he would recover.

But for Robin, old habits died hard. He was the seventh dog to come in to visit Ravi. But after he had left and was back at the front gate, he found a way to pretend to be the sixteenth, and came in to visit Ravi again. He was aided by the cook's poor eyesight and Blackie's straying attention.

But Ravi recognised him. He tapped Robin's head; you devil, he laughed. Robin was so elated that he wagged his tail crazily and then ran out of the house.



But Ravi cares for more than just a pack of twenty-one street dogs. That evening, at the gate of his house in Bangalore, I also saw four wild cows. Cows are holy animals for Hindus. 'Ghee' or purified butter, is processed from their milk for the holy lamps used in the rituals of the Brahmin priests. In this no-killing country, the holy cows are free and not possessed by anyone.

There are four free cows who always come to the gate of Ravi's house to be fed. Ravi has named them Ganges, Gowri, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati.

Ganges is named after the Goddess of the Ganges river. Gowri is another name for Parvati, the spouse of Lord Shiva. Lakshmi is the Goddess of Wealth. Sarasvati is the Goddess of Learning and the Arts.

All the cows named after the goddesses.

Translated from the Vietnamese by the author

Adapted by Wayne Karlin

** Ho Anh Thai has published over forty books, from novels and short story collections to essays, literary biographies and travel reportages. His books have been translated into over ten languages including English and French: 'Behind the Red Mist' (short fiction), 'The Women on the Island' (a novel), 'Apocalypse Hotel' (a novel), 'L'île aux Femmes, Aventures en Inde' etc.*