

**A MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCE APPROACH TO READING  
*GULLIVER'S TRAVELS* BY J. SWIFT**

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**Abstract:** Reading literary works in the original has always been a challenge for EFL students, even those who are in teacher training programs and have a richer philological background. As reading is the best way to discover and understand literature, it is important to identify effective means of involving students in active, meaningful reading procedures. The article provides an example of how to make the reading of J. Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" more engaging for students, applying Gardner's MI theory.

**Keywords:** MI theory, reading proficiency, language proficiency, learning for understanding

Reading is both an advantage and a challenge for EFL students. The ability to understand and respond to written texts is an important precondition for further development of language skills and participation in class discussions. The ability to read and understand fiction contributes to developing a deeper understanding of the language, its structure and vocabulary. In addition, literary works engage students in reflecting on their own beliefs and values, think about their own selves in terms of identity. Motivating students to read literary works is not an easy task nowadays. An intrinsic students' willingness and readiness to read relates to the necessary internal impulse which makes the reading of fiction enjoyable. It is a great advantage if students demonstrate this positive attitude to reading. If they don't, teachers are supposed to deal efficiently with such a challenge and be able to create a stimulating reading environment. The present article seeks to provide arguments that Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences may help teachers create this type of stimulating reading environment. A model of engaging students in activities that connect to different types of intelligence has been created based on J. Swift's novel "The Gulliver's Travels".

The present research relies on several personal teaching beliefs: (1) literature is an important source of learning about human experiences and it helps expand our knowledge and understanding of the world; (2) reading fiction leads to building critical thinking skills, as we deal with symbols, make connections, infer meanings or decipher ambiguity; (3) reading is beneficial and interesting when one is engaged in the process actively and visual arts can be a supportive tool in the teachers' hands; (4) accepting diversity of thought and opinion and appreciating and encouraging all the students' talents, teachers can help them read fiction with understanding and joy.

Reading proficiency in a foreign language is both significant and difficult to attain and it depends on several factors. Research shows that the level of reading proficiency that a student has in the L1 appears to be a factor in the development of L2 reading skills. Royer J. and Carlo M. assume that there is a transfer of reading skills from L1 to L2, which means that the more a student has learned to be a questioning and meaning creating reader in his mother tongue, the greater the chances are that he/she will be a critical effective reader in

L2. Explaining competence as “conscious understanding of language rules that govern language production”, Ellis claims that L1 competence is not the only factor to influence reading in a foreign language and that “L2 proficiency is another strong factor in L2 reading” [5, p.5]. Similarly, Alderson maintains that L2 readers “will not be able to read as well in the foreign language until they have reached a threshold level of competence in that foreign language” [1, p. 19]. This opinion is supported by Devine’s point of view, whose research on general language ability and second language reading supports the hypothesis that “L2 reading problems are due to inadequate knowledge of the target language” [4, p. 262-3]. Teachers should consider these factors as they design the content of literature courses where reading is both a skill to be consolidated and a tool of learning.

The great body of research findings on reading in a foreign language comes to reinforce the idea that reading is a complex cognitive process. University students at foreign language departments read to extract, build, infer, classify, compare, organize, summarize, interpret, etc. information, which requires not only solid language proficiency but also a certain level of literary competence. According to Culler, a literary work has meaning only when it is read, or listened to, in a particular way; when it is read “as literature” [2, p. 149]. To read a text as literature “is not to make one’s mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for” [ibid, p.132]. Culler introduces the concept of ‘literary competence’ and claims that it is activated if ‘in an interpretative community’ the practices of reading literature allow readers to interpret works in a variety of ways.

When assigning the list of literary works to be read by students in the original, I often felt doubtful and apprehensive of the outcome. I could feel students’ resistance to reading the work in the foreign language or to reading the whole work. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences has proven to be an approach which helps teachers and students build a motivated, interested reading community as it offers teachers tools to cater to the needs and interests of each student and, gradually, gets students into the nets of reading.

Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences has become popular with teachers as it emphasizes the value of individual differences in learning and expression. According to Gardner, the

traditional question ‘How smart are you?’ is not relevant in the contemporary society. It is more important to develop in every individual student the understanding of his/her own strengths, hence the question ‘How are you smart?’ Embracing this approach, educators have greater liberty to respond to the challenges of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and namely, prepare young people for life, work and citizenship. Acknowledging the existence of at least seven intelligences that combine in numerous ways and form unique students’ profiles, educators learn to value students’ interpersonal skills and sense of responsibility, alongside with their critical thinking and creativity. H. Gardner criticizes the current system of education, considering it ‘the most unfair education’. He believes that schools highly value only the students who have ‘a law professor mind’, those who have strong linguistic and logical abilities, excluding the children whose minds work differently. Gardner questioned the accepted opinion that intelligence is one single entity and in *Frames of Mind* (1983), demonstrated the existence of seven intelligences. In *Intelligence Reframed*, published in 1999, H. Gardner first describes the eighth (naturalistic) intelligence.

The MI theory gives teachers opportunities to supplement modern teaching strategies that can be applied in the EFL classroom. Campbell B. (1994), Lazear D. (1991, 1999), and others have developed instructional procedures and classroom strategies based on H. Gardner’s identified intelligences. A list of literature based activities catering to each type of intelligence, is provided below:

*Verbal/Linguistic* – the intelligence related to words and language:

- Debate an issue within the story with another student;
- Write a poem that is related to the story;
- Keep a double-entry journal (quotes from the text vs. student’s response\thoughts);
- Write an acrostic poem based on a character’s name (personage characterisation).

*Visual/Spatial* – the intelligence relying on the sense of sight and being able to visualize an object, includes the ability to create internal mental images:

- Use magazine images to create a collage about the setting or main character.
- Design a logo or icon to represent a theme within the story.
- Color code or highlight important information in the text.

- Complete a plot diagram for the story.

*Bodily/Kinesthetic* – the intelligence related to physical movement and body functions:

- Play a game of “character charades” or pantomime a character.
- Use papier-mâché or clay to make a model of something from the story.
- Perform a dramatic reading of a scene from the story.
- Choreograph and perform a dance that represents a conflict within the story.

*Interpersonal* – the intelligence operating through person-to-person relationships and communication:

- Interview classmates about books they are reading.
- Participate in a Reciprocal Teaching group activity with three other students (Summarizer, Questioner, Clarifier, Predictor).
- Research the setting, era, or author of the story with a classmate.
- Create a game that is related to the story for your classmates.

*Intrapersonal* – the intelligence related to inner states of being and self-reflection:

- Select a character that you most identify with and explain why you relate to this person.
- Identify and evaluate how events, characters, or settings from the story make you feel.
- Explain how something from the story can be applied or connected to your life.

*Logical/Mathematical* – the intelligence dealing with inductive and deductive thinking and recognition of abstract patterns:

- Compare and contrast two different stories, characters, settings, plot... etc.
- Distinguish facts and opinions within the text.
- Identify and explain cause-and-effect relationships from the story.

*Musical* – the intelligence based on recognition of tonal and sound patterns and sensitivity to rhythm:

- Listen to music from the era of story.
- Write a rhythmic poem, chant, or rap about the story.

- Find music that represents the mood, setting, or character of the story.

*Naturalist* – the intelligence dealing with the recognition, appreciation and understanding of the natural world:

- Identify and explain how natural forces (weather, animals, plants, science... etc.) affect the story.
- Collect items on a nature walk that can be used to create a collage or model related to the story.
- Take a mini-field trip outside to read (park, playground, grass field... etc.).
- Keep a log of nature’s impact on the daily life of the characters.

Having this MI inventory, any teacher can design activities that would suit his/her students’ intelligence profiles. Further on, several examples on how this inventory was applied while reading J. Swift’s novel “Gulliver’s Travels” will be provided. The novel is included in the curriculum of History of English Literature course at the Department of English and German Philology at A. *Russo* Balti State University. On the one hand, reading the novel in English does not seem to be a difficulty as students are already familiar with it, many of them having read it earlier in their mother tongue. On the other hand, it is mainly this factor that does hinder students’ understanding of the rich nuances of ambiguity and irony that the novel abounds in. The students are influenced by the preconceptions that had been previously created and continue reading it as a piece of work belonging to children’s literature. Consequently, class discussions need to be organized in such a way as to help students see the novel in a new light and, thus, stir their interest to read it from a different perspective.

As a lead-in activity, the following piece of information was presented to all students, with the purpose of having the students reflect on England’s historical and political background, which J. Swift alluded to in his novel.

**Example 1:**

Read the information. What conclusion does it help you draw about the novel?

J. Swift (1667-1745) wrote “Gulliver’s Travels” (1721-1725) at a time when Europe was the world’s dominant power, and when England, despite its small size, was rising in power on the basis of its powerful fleet. England’s growing military and economic strength

brought it into contact with a wide variety of new animals, plants, places, and things, but the most significant change wrought by European expansion was the encounter with previously unknown people with radically different modes of existence. The miniature stature of the Lilliputians can be interpreted as \_\_\_\_\_.

The next activity aims at offering students more information about the writer. Most relevant events had been selected, names of parties, geographical locations and some proper names, so as to offer students an overall understanding of the period. However, it is not presented to the students in the format of a ready-made text. Students are supposed to fit the given vocabulary into the appropriate space and construct meaningful sentences. Four pieces of texts were prepared, so students split in four groups, each working on a different text.

**Example 2.**

Write in the missing words and read facts from J.Swift's biography.

(a) *suspect, tax, become, send, political, reject, go*

In 1707 Swift \_\_\_\_\_ (send) to London as emissary of Irish clergy seeking remission of \_\_\_\_\_ on Irish clerical incomes. His requests were \_\_\_\_\_, however, by the Whig government and by Queen Anne, who \_\_\_\_\_ him of being irreligious. While in London he met Esther Vanhomrigh, who would \_\_\_\_\_ his "Vanessa." During the next few years he \_\_\_\_\_ back and forth between Ireland and England, where he was involved, largely as an observer rather than a participant, in the highest English \_\_\_\_\_ circles.

(b) *disappointment, became, promotion, disgusted*

In 1710, A Description of a City Shower was published. Swift, \_\_\_\_\_ with their alliance with the Dissenters, fell out with Whigs, allied himself with the Tories, and \_\_\_\_\_ the editor of the Tory newspaper The Examiner. In 1713 Swift was installed as Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin - a \_\_\_\_\_ which was, again, a \_\_\_\_\_.

So far, mainly three of the types of intelligences have been tackled while the students worked in groups getting engaged in searching for word meanings and establishing cause-effect relationships: interpersonal, linguistic and logical-mathematical.

Students, whose visual-spatial type of intelligence is dominant and who like to form mental images, can be encouraged to read the novel assisted by visual arts or mapmaking. They may offer to illustrate scenes from the novel or draw characters as they see them. They may also comment on the existing illustrations to the novel, focusing on the artist's choice of colours or details.



*Picture 1*

they can see the objects better. The task may seem too easy for university students, but it is definitely not. While some of the objects described are easy to recognize, others remain confusing, for they describe objects that were valued back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

“... and on the right, a bag or pouch divided into two cells, each cell capable of holding three of your majesty's subjects. In one of these cells were several globes, or balls, of a most ponderous metal, about the bigness of our heads, and requiring a strong hand to lift them: the other cell contained a heap of certain black grains, but of no great bulk or weight, for we could hold above fifty of them in the palms of our hands” [10, p.34].

Since our students are in a teacher training programme, it is justified to involve them to participate in a Reciprocal Teaching Group activity. Working in such a group, students activate their interpersonal intelligence, as well as linguistic, musical, and kinesthetic. As students advance with the reading of the novel, groups of students are assigned to design mini-lessons on a chapter of the novel. This activity is similar to the Literature Circle, as it also requires distribution of roles: Summarizer, Questioner, Clarifier, Predictor. Only, the Reciprocal Teaching group comes to class with purposefully designed activities on the novel. Examples of such activities are as follows:

### **Example 3.**

Read the fragment on pp. 32-34, which is an inventory of things found in Gulliver's pockets. Make a list of the described objects and find them in the picture.

The students get the picture (Picture 1) in its natural format, so that



#### **Example 4.**

Reciprocal Teaching Group: members and responsibilities.

a. Summarizer: The summarizer wrote the gist of Chapter One in 12 sentences. Each sentence was written on a separate sheet of paper. As students approached the teacher's desk, they had to pick up a sentence, read it to the class and remain in the front. As more students come to the front, they align in a row, in accordance with the logical sequence of the events related in the summary. As the twelfth student reads the last sentence and finds his/her place in the row, the students read their sentences again to verify the logical sequence of the related events.

b. Questioner: The questioner's task is to formulate questions, which may be varied, depending on the aims of the questioning. To meet the purposes of developing literary competence, the student asked questions like *Why does J. Swift use exaggeration/hyperbole as a device? What does the author emphasize as he contrasts Gulliver's sizes in the country of Lilliput and in the country of Brobdingnag? How does J. Swift raise the issue of misuse of science?*

c. Clarifier: Since the role of the clarifier is to eliminate any sort of difficulty in understanding or interpreting certain episodes, events or characters' actions, he/she has the task to identify the troublesome fragments and engage other students in reflective activities. A good way to do it is to invite students create posters that contain drawings, charts, diagrams that help clarify a complicated fragment. The poster should have a title (for example *Foreign Threat* as to clarify the author's description of the danger of an invasion from abroad, p.51); images of representatives of the Tramecksan and Slamecksan party people (low and high heels), additional examples of allusions to the English political establishment.

d. Predictor: The predictor's role is to suppose what may happen next in the novel. Additionally, they should be able to explain what details in the novel drive them to the prediction they made. Supporting their predictions with short musical pieces that were selected to render the tone of the narration or the imminent danger in which the character may be found is an effective way to nurture students' musical intelligence. An appropriate selection to accompany the episode describing the storm which caused the shipwreck in Part 1 might be Antonio Lucio Vivaldi's *Storm*, from the book "The Four Seasons". Yet, students should come with their own selections and comments.

We should not neglect some students' preference and need to work individually, nurturing their intrapersonal intelligence. Such students may like to keep track of particular details by recording them in a special diary. For example, students may engage in demonstrating how J. Swift criticized or praised certain human qualities as he created his personages. Evidence of such characteristics as loyalty, honour, respect, courage may be collected in the diary, indicating the number of the page where these can be found. Such a student may take the role of an expert, as he/she may have always recorded examples, quotes, names of personages and setting details.

The provided examples are just several selective options of how to design activities for a more engaging reading of fiction aided by Gardner's MI theory, which makes us aware of how different our students are. Thinking of our students as individuals with varied strengths and talents and offering them opportunities to share their talents we help raise their confidence. As H. Gardner posits: "Taking human differences seriously lies at the heart of the MI perspective" [6, p. 91]. As the author explains it, all individuals "cannot be profitably arrayed on a single intellectual dimension", and also "any uniform educational approach is likely to serve only a small percentage of children optimally" [ibid, p. 91]. It is the teachers' responsibility to take the differences of our students seriously, and teach in such a way that every student has the maximum opportunity to understand and master the content, and then show the others what they have learned and understood. It is true that teaching with MI requires additional time, effort and money investment. It makes teachers depart from traditional ways of planning and evaluation and look for alternative means of organizing the teaching process. In this process, students should be co-participants, active and creative, confident that they will not be criticized for something they cannot do very well yet. The MI approach proves to be effective as it helps provide consistent opportunities for students to respond to reading through discussion, writing, art, drama, storytelling, music, and other creative expressions. This type of approach creates a stress-free environment for students, sustaining their motivation and interest in reading.

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