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Literature in ELT Setting: Students' Attitudes and Preferences towards Literary Texts

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Abstract

This study analyses the importance and the role of literary texts in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning and teaching contexts. The study focuses on the theoretical assumptions and practical implications of using literary texts in the context of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The study discusses the pedagogical benefits and potential drawbacks of using literary texts and it includes a survey of students' attitudes towards using literary texts. The target population is a group of 53 students of English language and literature, who are non-native speakers of English and whose future career is teaching English as a second or foreign language. The survey examines students' attitudes towards the criteria for text selection in EFL contexts, including the most appropriate genre and text type, the language used of literary texts, the relevance of literary texts and the impact on students' beliefs and personal life, as well as representations of culture presented in literary texts. In addition, the survey also focuses on the aspects of the literary texts which present difficulties for the students. The analyses of the findings indicate that the majority of language learners prefer prose to poetic texts. It can be concluded from the findings that topics relevant to students also increase their interest and engagement. The study presents suggestions and recommendations related to text selection. The study offers recommendations related to teaching procedures and opportunities for language learning provided by the text.

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1. Introduction

The changing relationship between language learning and teaching and literary texts in the context of second or foreign language learning used to be and still is a central point of a great deal of debate. Until recently, literature was considered to be too far from the language of daily communication to be needed and embodied in a foreign

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language classroom. However, ‘the awkward fact that many learners want and love literary texts’ (Coolie and Slater, 1987, p 2) was probably the first driving force which brought literary texts back in the language classrooms.

This paper reviews the theoretical assumptions regarding the role of literary texts in language teaching and learning and the current situation related to study and implementation of literary texts in the context of language and literature courses offered at South East European University at Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications and the Language Centre.

2. 2. Benefits and drawbacks of using literary texts and different genres in ELT setting

2.1. Benefits of using literature in second language education

The arguments advocating the use of literary texts in the language classroom and in second language education are numerous. The benefits of including literary texts in language teaching and learning for second or foreign language learners can be grouped into several major groups:

2.1.1. Literary texts are highly motivating

It is often claimed that literary texts are intellectually stimulating. They allow readers to create worlds with which they may not be familiar and the way they do this is by relying on language.

2.1.2. Literature gives the learner cultural knowledge and intercultural experience

Literature helps students to develop their linguistic skills, as well as their cultural knowledge and sensitivity towards cultural issues. Therefore, literature is helpful when teaching cultural issues to foreign language students. By learning about culture, students learn about the history, people’s customs and traditions.

2.1.3. Literary texts promote language learning and are authentic materials

In some educational systems, even today, the students have limited access to spoken English, or they do not find often opportunities to be in a setting in which they can practice their spoken language outside of a language classroom. Therefore, written materials, literary texts being included, are very important for stimulating language acquisition. Literature helps students learn the non-spoken and non casual modes of the English language. Cairns and Cairns, in Hill (1987) use the term internalisation, defining the notion as follows: “When people learn their native language, they are not taught the rules of grammar and the meaning of words, they work out how the language works from what they hear, imperfect though this sometimes is, and so internalize or construct mentally their knowledge of the language. “(Cairns and Cairns, 1976, in Hill 1987, p 7). But how can foreign language learners do this? One of the ways to internalize the grammar and work out the meaning of the words from context, they need to have a sufficient body of both authentic and understandable material to work with, for instance a variety of texts and extensive reading programmes. Such exposure to authentic materials will promote the language acquisition, and reinforce what the students have studied as an academic exercise.

2.1.4. Literary texts are engaging and evoke personal response

One of the most valuable advantages of using literature in language teaching and learning is the personal involvement and enrichment it cultivates in readers and learners. Most of the materials and course books designed for language teaching contain materials which are concerned more with grammar rules and vocabulary. Learning fostered upon learners is “analytic, piecemeal and at the level of the personality fairly superficial” (Collie and Slater, 1987, p 5), meaning that these materials, although they serve their purpose to provide ground for learning, provide not more than learning only to the learner: there is no personal satisfaction or involvement. Engaging in literary texts enables the learners to focus beyond the grammar and the syntax of the target language. The reader pursues the development of the story and willing to share his/her personal responses.

2.2. Disadvantages of using literature in ELT

The most common arguments against teaching of literature in language classrooms discussed by authors are the following:

2.2.1. *The language of literature is too complex*

Literature, due to its complexity and unique use of language is too difficult and contributes nothing to teaching the grammar and the vocabulary of practical everyday language. Sometimes, the language of literature and literary texts does not provide the vocabulary and syntax required to convey everyday messages. Parkinson and Thomas differentiate between difficult and odd language. According to them...“like other learning materials, literary texts can be so difficult that learners don’t understand them or understand them only by dint of time consuming and wearisome dictionary work” (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000, p.12).

2.2.2. *Literature won’t help the students to promote their occupational and academic needs*

Cook (in Brumfit and Carter, 1986) discusses this issue relating it to the discussion of literary extracts and texts, adequate for EFL learners. In his essay, he states that:” ... the study of literary English is seldom suited to the foreign learner’s needs, and the mastery of literary texts has little bearing on the learner’s need to produce more functional written or spoken forms of the language” (p.150) This illustrates another point of view, that literary texts cannot provide additional benefits for the language learner to those obtained from standard course books.

2.2.3. *Literary texts reflect cultural aspects which are difficult for students to grasp*

Critics of the use of literature maintain that if literary texts reflect a particular cultural perspective, they may be difficult for ESL /EFL students to read and understand cultural concepts which are unfamiliar. Therefore understanding of the literary texts is difficult, or the texts can be unacceptable due to different reasons (moral, religious reasons). This makes the entire concept of introducing particular literary text unacceptable.

2.3. Teaching short stories in EFL/ESL context

The advantages of working with short stories in a foreign language learning classroom are numerous. They vary from concise writing and more simple language (in comparison to poetry) they also present numerous possibilities for language activities, ranging from in class discussions, character analysis and creative writing. Collie and Slater (1991) list the advantages of using short stories for language teachers: short stories’ practical length means they can be read and covered entirely in one or two class sessions; they are usually less demanding for foreign language learners ; they are not complicated for students to work with on their own; they offer greater variety of choice for different interests and tastes (a teacher can choose very different stories); and they can be used with all levels of language proficiency (beginner to advanced), and all ages . Sage (1987, p.48) points out the following: “A good story is a joy. Short fiction helps impart both pleasure and knowledge to non-native students. Neither must be postponed or sacrificed. Most stories, whether they deal with serious or comic matters, are simply fun to read and discuss”.

Using short stories makes the task of reading easier for the students compared with the other literary genres. Today, unfortunately, reading has become, for some students, a tedious activity in their lives. In schools, students’ interest is increasingly difficult to motivate, especially when it comes to literary texts in EFL/ESL classroom. One possibility to respond to this problem is using shorter literary texts. Therefore, short stories in the EFL/ESL classroom can offer a solution to this problem that teachers of foreign languages have to face. It can be concluded that short stories, due to the limited length, help the reader and the student to remain focused on the content, plot and language in the story.

2.4. Teaching novels in EFL/ESL context

The arguments in favour of teaching novels in the context of foreign or second language learning are similar to the reasons for including short stories in the same context, including the fact that novels are enjoyable, provide insight into another culture, foster reading skills and language acquisition and encourage personal involvement and

identification. Novels and short stories have a lot of common characteristics. Novels, similar to short stories, have a chronological sequence of events and a narrator, as well as a set of characters. However, there are differences between novels and short stories. Lazar (1993) defines the differences between a short story and a novel as follows: "In a novel, there is likely to be a larger cast of characters than in a short story, the plot might be complicated and methods of narration can sometimes be more complex" (Lazar, 1993, p.89). Therefore, when teaching a novel, these differences need to be taken into consideration. Also, there are several problems of practical nature when dealing with novels, among them the length of novels probably being the most common one.

2.5. Teaching poetry in EFL/ESL context

The traditional view of poetry as one of the most sophisticated forms of literary and linguistic expression makes it inaccessible to the majority of second or foreign language learners. Therefore, in many contexts, poetry has not been considered as appropriate material for foreign language learning.

According to Widdowson (1980, in Brumfit & Carter, 1986, p.133) the issues regarding selecting and using poetry with foreign or second language learners include the following:

One of the difficulties that confronts the teacher who tries to stimulate students' interest in short lyrical poems, is that they are so often so slight not to say inconsequential, in paraphrasable content. Prose, fiction, drama, offer something substantial by way of characters and events: they tell a tale, which survives in summary and in translation. (p.133)

Another difficulty is the abundance of literary and historical references found in the works of great poets, which limit understanding greatly for both native and non-native speakers. As Brindley (1980) in Finch (2003, p.29) points out: "Poems often deal with geographical or social settings alien to the students' experience. Perhaps the greatest barrier to understanding poetry, however, is its complex language. Poetry, from this perspective has little to offer the EFL classroom, especially at middle school and high school level".

On the other hand, there are several advantages to using English poetry in EFL/ESL context. Collie and Slater (1991) state the following:

Poems offer a rich, varied repertoire and are a source of much enjoyment for teacher and learner alike. There is an initial advantage of length- many poems are well suited to a single classroom lesson. Then again, they often explore themes of universal concern and embody life experiences, observations and the feelings evoked by them. Their brilliant concision and strong imagery combine to powerful overall effect. Moreover, poems are sensitively turned to what, for language learners, are the vital areas of stress, rhythm and similarities of sounds. Reading poetry enables the learner to experience the power of language outside the strait-jacket of more standard written sentence structure and lexis.

(Collie and Slater, p.226).

It can be concluded that poetry is regarded by most ESL/EFL learners, as well as teachers as complex and too difficult therefore contributing very little to second language learning and the development of language skills. On the other hand, the advantages of using poetry in language learning are obvious. Carefully selected English poems offer various themes which are relevant to the interests and concerns of learners. Therefore, English poetry can motivate the students to express their emotions, opinions, reactions, and feelings.

2.6. Cultural aspects in literary texts

One of the purposes of this study is to discuss the issues of teaching and reading literary texts across cultures, as well as representations of culture presented in literary texts. The study aims to analyse the language learners' attitudes and beliefs and impact of their cultural background and experience in the course of reading literary texts which present cultural aspects which are different of learners' culture. According to Kramsch (1993), various materials are useful to promote cultural understanding, including non-literary texts, textbooks, magazines and videos. However, literary texts are important, due to the fact that learners encounter different cultural representations and offer a chance for a richer intercultural experience and deeper intercultural understanding. Therefore, she recommends using literary texts to promote the awareness and understanding of different cultural concepts. Furthermore, the cultural aspects presented in the text should be carefully chosen in terms of the theme and ideas developed in the text, as well as the values presented. The importance of values and beliefs in literary texts is discussed by Valdes (1986) who states the following:

An understanding of literature depends upon discernment of the values inherent, but not necessarily specifically expressed, in the work. The values of any cultural group, even if the author's own values differ from those of the group to which he or she belongs, underlie plots and become the theme in virtually all works of literature. Obviously, values are not universal even within cultural groups, or there would be nothing to write about, but there are certain concepts in each cultural group that carry general consensus, despite dissenting minorities. Perhaps the reason the Ten Commandments have withstood scrutiny for so many years and through so many cultures is their universality, geographically as well as chronologically.(138)

Similarly, Lazar (1993) emphasises the importance of embedding cultural aspects in reading texts and the complexity of the relationship between cultural aspects and literary texts. She points out the following: "Readers invariably interpret texts in the light of their own world-view and cultural experience. The relationship between a literary text and the culture in which it is produced is highly complex, since few texts are mere factual representations of their culture" (Lazar 1993, 62). Another author who analyses the relationship between literary texts and teaching and learning foreign language and cultural aspects is Hanauer (2001) who proposes an argument that literary texts very frequently entail presenting diverse cultural aspects and interpretations of these texts are culturally specific. He also suggests presenting and analyzing these aspects within the language classroom. It can be concluded that implementation of appropriate literary texts which present various cultural aspects facilitates understanding of different cultural aspects. Consequently, it contributes to wider intercultural understanding and perceiving the diverse and similar aspects of the culture represented in a literary text and ultimately it builds the intercultural competence of the students. It can be concluded that literary texts can be considered as media for enhancing students' cultural understanding and raising students' awareness of cultural diversity, thus promoting cultural competence.

2.7. The use of simplified literary texts

Significant number of authors and studies (Johnston, 1981, 1982, Shook, 1997, Young, 1999 in Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy and McNamara 2007, p15), the importance of text simplification in the context of ELT. They also highlight the practical value of simplified literary texts and graded readers in teaching reading to L2 learners, especially learners of beginner, lower intermediate or intermediate level of proficiency. According to Hedge (1985), the purpose of graded readers is to introduce students to increasing levels of difficulty in the text, achieving a controlled balance between familiar and unfamiliar language. Therefore, according to Hedge, the language of the graded readers demonstrates three types of control: lexical, structural and information control. The grading of vocabulary is called lexical control. Structural control involves the word frequency, sentence length and sentence complexity. Information control may be achieved through limiting the number of characters in the literary work or the depth of their definition.

Critics of simplified texts argue that simplification of authentic texts leads to a confusing notion of language complexity. According to them the language presented to students in textbooks does not reflect real language, rather they see it as artificial and unvaried.

3. Method, target population and findings

The purpose of the research was to investigate students' attitudes towards the impact of literary texts on language learning and teaching. The study discusses the pedagogical benefits and potential drawbacks of using literary texts and it includes a survey of students' attitudes towards using literary texts.

The target population is a group of 53 undergraduate students of English language and literature, who are non-native speakers of English and whose future career is teaching English as a second or foreign language. Their age varied from 20-31 years old. All of them were non-native speakers of English whose proficiency ranged from upper intermediate to advanced level. In terms of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), their language ability can be rated between the levels B2 and C1 and the participants can be considered to be independent or proficient users of English. The participants were exposed to authentic literary texts (prose, poetry and plays) as a part of English Literature courses. The participants had also an opportunity to use graded readers and simplified texts, as a part of English Skills courses during their undergraduate studies.

The survey was presented in a form of Likert scale and included 20 different statements. The aim of the survey is to analyze students' attitudes towards the using literary texts in the context of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The survey analyses students' opinions about most appropriate genre and text type and what are they consider to be enjoyable and interesting: poetry, novels or short stories. In addition, the survey analyses students' perception of difficulties when working on literary texts written in foreign language and where do these issues originate: the language (old or archaic language) used of literary texts, the genre or the cultural aspects presented in the texts, in addition to the issues related to text length (the text is too long) or lack of time or willingness to read. Furthermore, the study examines students' perceptions of the relevance of literary texts and the impact of texts on students' beliefs and personal life.

Last part of the survey asks the students to provide their own suggestions regarding literary texts. Their suggestions should include the text topics, which, according to them, are interesting and attractive, their opinion on useful method when teaching and learning literature, as well as their suggestions how to raise students' interests when teaching literary texts to EFL learners.

The following table presents participants' answers:

Table 1. Students' survey

	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. When reading or working with literary texts, I mostly enjoyed novels.	12	28	10	3	0
2. When reading or working with literary texts, I mostly enjoyed short stories.	16	22	10	4	1
3. When reading or working with literary texts, I mostly enjoyed poems.	0	14	22	16	1
4. When reading or working with literary texts, I mostly enjoyed plays.	10	18	12	10	3
5. When reading or working with literary texts, I mostly enjoyed reading graded readers and simplified texts.	1	12	28	12	0
6. When reading or working with literary texts, I found poetry to be very difficult.	20	14	16	3	0
7. When reading or working with literary texts, I found prose to be very difficult.	0	13	17	22	1
8. Most of the difficulties were due to the complex and archaic (old) language used in the text.	20	17	10	3	3
9. Most of the difficulties were due to the difficult or unknown cultural aspects described in the texts (beliefs, relationships, values, traditions).	0	6	14	26	16
10. Most of the difficulties were due to the length of the literary texts.	10	4	26	3	10
11. Most of the difficulties were due to lack of time to read literary texts.	2	3	20	18	10
12. Most of the difficulties were due to lack of habit/willingness to read literary texts.	0	3	12	18	20
13. It helps me when the teacher provides background information (culture, history, politics, and author) related to the text.	16	24	12	1	0

14. It helps me when the teacher introduces different language activities, group work and pair work when working on the literary text.	14	22	14	2	0
15. It helps me when the teacher provides related to the topic, theme, plot and characters in the literary text.	18	16	16	2	1
16. I prefer to read literary texts on my own and work individually.	6	14	16	14	3
17. It helps me when the topics in the literary texts are related to and relevant for my personal life.	22	18	10	3	0
18. It helps me when the text introduces cultural aspects which are familiar to me.	12	16	10	14	1
19. I accept literary texts which introduce topics and cultural aspects which differ from my own values and culture.	28	12	13	0	0
20. It helps me to watch a film or a video related to the text.	30	18	5	0	0

In your opinion, what can the teachers do in order to make literature courses more interesting and useful for the students? Which topics (are the best? Which teaching methods are very useful? Which texts and which genres are the most appropriate? Please provide suggestions.

Some of the participants' answers included the following recommendations:

- In my opinion, in order to make literature courses more interesting, teachers should use plenty of materials and texts which provide opportunities for in-class work. The topics should be related to interesting topics: love, family, relationships. Personally, I like short stories and perhaps poetry
- It is always interesting to watch videos and films based on novels and stories.
- The teachers should take into consideration the students' preferences when it comes to literary texts. Appropriate topics are always welcomed-especially those relevant to students' life and beliefs. And activities which engage the students- in-class discussions, writing, projects, are useful.
- Contemporary literary texts are very interesting and catch the attention of the students.
- Teachers should provide texts which are appropriate for multicultural group of students and select texts carefully. Videos and films are also a great way to accompany the texts.

4. Discussion

From the results presented in the chart above, it can be concluded that the majority of the participants often enjoy novels and short stories. Most of them prefer poems only in some cases or rarely and the majority of the participants (34) frequently consider poetry to be difficult to understand. Graded readers and simplified texts are accepted well among the participants. Most of the participants (37) agree that complex and archaic language is a serious hindrance when working with literary texts. Only a small number of participants attribute the difficulties they encounter when dealing with literary texts to unknown aspects of culture, although they believe that it is helpful if they are familiarized with the cultural aspects before. In fact, the survey results show that a vast majority of the participants accept literary texts which introduce cultural aspects which differ from their own beliefs and culture. The majority of the participants believe that sometimes they lack the time, but not the willingness to read literature. The results of the survey show that providing background information related to literary texts in terms of the historical circumstances, social aspects, beliefs and values related to the text is considered to be helpful by the majority of the participants (36). Furthermore, information regarding the topic or the plot of the text is also perceived as useful. Visual materials which accompany the texts, especially films, are favoured by a vast majority of the participants.

Finally, additional comments and responses by the participants stated in the questionnaire indicate that when dealing with literary texts, students prefer contemporary texts and topics which they can relate to and preferably short stories or novels. In addition, they expect that language activities, including working on the vocabulary in the text, will be incorporated in the class. Furthermore, additional information related to the theme, plot or the background of the text (historical or cultural aspects) is perceived as helpful and needed.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Text selection

After analyzing the potential difficulties, the following list of suggestions regarding text selection for literature and language courses in the context of second or foreign language can be given. The texts chosen should be only one level beyond students' language competence, which means that the students should be able to understand the literary text in terms of the message it conveys and as a whole. It is to be expected that they will encounter unknown words or phrases which will be unknown and present a challenge to the students, at the same time taking the students a little bit beyond their current level of English. However, texts which set serious linguistic difficulties for the learners are not recommendable. The potential linguistic difficulties should be taken into consideration and it is recommended that dealing with these difficulties should be part of introducing the literary text via language approaches which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The texts chosen should not be too culturally insider oriented and should not be overburdened with cultural or historical references. Cultural concepts which are new and unknown contribute to raising students' interest and personal response and raise students' cultural awareness. They can be pre-taught and explained to the students via background information relevant for the text. However the literary text chosen should not be almost impossible for the students to comprehend due to the unknown cultural or historical references.

The texts chosen should introduce ideas which are interesting and relevant for the students which result in fruitful discussion. Concepts which are new, although challenging, might be more interesting than the safer choice of universal themes such as love, family, marriage or nature. However, personalizing and bringing these concepts closer to students' personal experience is another way to overcome conceptual difficulties.

5.2. Traditional and contemporary approaches

5.2.1. Reading aloud

This chapter will discuss and recommend some teaching methods and procedures which can be applied when dealing with literary texts in the context of literature and language courses. From the traditional approaches, which are common in the literature classrooms reading aloud can be mentioned. Parkinson & Reid Thomas (2000, p.28) define this approach as follows: "One point about reading aloud is that it is a specialist skill-most people do it badly even in their own language. To put it provocatively, if students are good enough to read a text aloud, they probably do not need to. However, reading aloud does not enhance reading for gist and detail and comprehension. A possible suggestion as far as reading aloud is concerned is that it might be done by the teacher or in some cases to use recorded readings or video materials if possible.

5.2.2. Rote learning and summary of content

Rote learning and summary of content is described by Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000) as: "learning the basic plot of the novels or plays, or facts about the writer's life, relevant history and politics" (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000, p.27). Memorization of the facts regarding a writer's life and other works and the historical, social or cultural conditions of time might be considered as an old-fashioned method, as well as producing and writing summaries of novels and short stories. However, in practice, the research done as a part of this study shows that these two approaches, although traditional in essence, still work successfully in some aspects. Providing information regarding the author's life and the conditions of the time sets the literary text in a more specific context and gives the learner a clear picture of the literary text in terms of meaning, concepts and messages of the text. On the other hand, these facts

also contribute to raising students' interest and motivation. However, it is necessary to emphasise that using only these two approaches, rote learning and summary of content, is not recommended.

5.2.3. Encouraging reading for pleasure and extensive reading schemes

Although there is no conclusive research evidence, teacher's opinions and personal evidence suggests that avid readers usually progress better in terms of improving language acquisition and language skills. Extensive reading schemes also encourage reading for pleasure, since learners are encouraged to select a book according to their personal preferences and read the book at their own pace. Among the primary goals of extensive reading is to encourage and motivate learners to read more, to read for general understanding instead of focusing on a shorter text. Apart from authentic literary texts which are appropriate for the students in terms of linguistic, cultural or conceptual difficulties, graded readers are another option to encourage extensive reading in the context of second or foreign language education. Recently, encouragement of extensive reading is more systematic.

5.2.4. Literary texts and language practice

Reading for foreign or second language practice usually involves working on a literary text, either an authentic one or an abridged literary text. The activities and techniques of working on a literary text involving second/foreign language practice are widely used, including explaining the unknown vocabulary by synonyms, matching exercises, using the words in context, true/false sentences, writing a different end to a short story, summarizing parts of a poem and diverse activities which include working on the language of the text.

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