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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW… REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF LITERARY TEXT IN TEACHING EFL

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Abstract
This article highlights the educational and instructional value of literary texts in the EFL classroom, pointing at various strategies that can be applied to actively involve learners in text-related activities and in communicative activities that go beyond the text, among which, heuristic ones. The literary text has been overshadowed and underappreciated as a teaching resource in EFL and this article is trying to revive it stressing the manifold benefits it can have for the learner.

Keywords: literary text, heuristic strategy, competence, reading, involvement.

Arguments in favor of literary texts in EFL

The Communicative Method in language teaching/learning has brought along a series of significant changes, among the most notable ones being the shift from learning the structural aspects of languages to developing competences. The functional aspects of a language make up the heart of language classes developing the communicative competence represents the uttermost objective in language pedagogy nowadays. The change is laudable from many perspectives, as the emphasis is not any longer on learning about the language, but learning the language for communicative purposes. In this regard, sustained efforts have been made to also provide learners with suitable contents aiming
at reaching the above-mentioned objective. The greatest majority of language course-books have banned the literary text from their contents, focusing mainly on non-literary ones, having strong reasons for that—using the language for real communication.

However, we consider that literary texts still deserve special attention in foreign language classes as they are an inegalable source depicting a substantial amount of language variety, including grammar variation, vocabulary and metaphoric language. This argument in favour of literary texts is supported by the observation that those students who have no contact with such materials at all in an EFL context, have a lot more difficulties in decoding the meaning of words in various contexts, and find it almost impossible to identify implicatures. The literary text, like short drama, for example, can serve as an excellent source for developing sociolinguistic competence. There are far too many students who display good or very good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, but face enormous difficulties when they are in a face-to-face interaction with a native speaker or when they have to use English as a means of communication in a lingua franca context.

Another reason speaking in favor of literary texts in EFL refers to using idiomatic expressions. The literary text is an authentic resource illustrating the use of such expressions in authentic situations.

In sum, we contend that using literary texts promotes diversity in the classroom and represents a valuable resource for differentiated instruction. We are all aware that there is no such notion as homogeneous classes and differentiated approaches are required in order to involve all the learners in the lesson. From this perspective, teachers can create a variety of activities meant to cover the many proficiency levels their students may have. For example: identify idiomatic expressions in the text and match their meanings with definitions or for more advanced learners to reformulate a passage using literary variants for underlined language structures or vice versa, literary versions to be converted into less literay ones.

Using literary texts in the classroom is an effective way to capture the students’ attention in learning the English language. Besides achieving the learning objectives in keeping with the curriculum, literary texts can make the teaching-learning process an interesting and attractive experience for both the teacher and the students. The reading class encompasses the involvement of the student when trying to discover the hidden meaning of different types of texts. The reading classes must create sense and emotions and for the student it is
necessary to experience the feelings of that fictional world. To practice reading with his/her students, the teacher should choose reading materials according to students’ proficiency levels. There are three principles of using literary texts within the English language classroom (Duff, Maley, 1990): linguistic, methodological and motivational.

a) In terms of language, literary texts offer genuine samples of a wide range of styles, registers, and text-types at many levels of difficulty. For this reason alone they are worthy of consideration.

b) The fact that literary texts are, in their very essence, open to multiple interpretations means that only rarely will two students’ understanding of or reaction to a given text be identical. This ready-made opinion gap between one individual’s interpretation and another’s can be bridged by genuine interaction.

c) Literary texts are non-trivial in the sense that they deal with matters which concerned the writer enough to make him/her write about them. In this, they are unlike many other forms of language teaching inputs, which frequently trivialize experience in the service of pedagogy. This „genuine feel” of literary texts is a powerful motivator, especially when allied to the fact the literary texts so often touch the themes to which students can bring a personal response from their own experience.

To use literary texts is beneficial because the teacher uses valuable authentic materials. A literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to the reader. The literary texts present different linguistic uses, forms, such as narration, dialogues, irony, exposition, etc. which reinforce the importance of the teacher as the leading force of his/ her students in accessing the desired truth and understanding the literary work. Literature offers cultural and language enrichment. Currently, English serves as a tool bridging cultures and the majority learn it for intercultural communication. Thus, literary texts can be exploited from this perspective as well, not just for reading and translation, as it was done a few decades ago. Students can be involved in constructive discussions referring to identifying and commenting on certain types of behavior in given situations, the language used by the characters, reactions to events, etc. followed by comparisons between mother tongue culture and target culture.

Getting to grips with literary texts at more advanced levels ensures that learners can handle language use in a variety of contexts and improve their language interpretation skills. Teachers can ask students to consider and compare word usage in a literary excerpt and a non literary one to identify different contextual connotations and vividness of expression.
The world of a literary text offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions, etc. This vivid imaginary world can quickly give the reader a feeling of preoccupations that structure a real society. The students are so engaged in the plot that they pay little attention to or even forget about difficulties they might have regarding vocabulary or grammar while speaking English. Moreover, they become more worried about understanding the story than about their vocabulary or grammar mistakes. Literary texts can promote a deeper personal involvement for both students and teacher. Through literature the students have the opportunity to actively and emotionally participate in the process of learning the English language. Engaging imaginatively within literary classes enables the students to shift the focus of their attention beyond the mechanical aspects of the foreign language system (Collie, 1997).

Language learning is believed to be more effective if students get emotionally involved in the material. Non-literary texts do not always offer this potential to learners, that is why we emphasize those literary texts should be part of a language learning curriculum. Teachers have the responsibility to choose the right text that would have an emotional impact on the learners, thus aiming at boosting their participation in the lesson. A literary text that depicts a situation students are familiar with is prone to produce hot debates in the class and even the weakest students will have something to come up with. Literary texts describing situations students are at ease with will generate deeper involvement on their part-they will all be eager to comment on, analyse and illustrate the situation using examples from their own life experience. Another benefit that should be pointed out is that participating in post-reading discussions will contribute to their acquiring the rules that govern verbal interactions, to observe certain rules of behavior in relation to the other participants. The teacher’s task is to take care that these rules are known to them and that the students observe them.

Pre-requisites for the use of literary texts in EFL

Obviously, introducing literary texts in the EFL classroom requires a pretty good level of proficiency. We would suggest at least B1 level according to the CECRL. If linguistic competence can be developed through a wide variety of contents, sociolinguisitc and pragmatic competences require a judicious choice of teaching materials. We deem that literary texts can be exploited efficiently from this perspective.
In secondary and high school, the study of literature cannot be achieved without knowing the specific problems of language: phonetics, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, because the exploitation of a literary text must be complete and complex. In order to be able to perceive the mysteries of literary text, the students need to have a good proficiency level, which will be facilitative of their discovering language learning from a different perspective.

The teacher’s role is not a hyper active one and his speaking time is to be limited if the proper text-based activities have been designed. Heuristic methods can be effectively and efficiently used to make students understand that literature is an art that requires commitment and sustained effort from the part of the student to discover its many-fold beauty. Exploring literary texts in the classroom is not meant to be limited to reading, translating and finding ready-made answers in the text. It can be turned into an unforgettable experience for the learners if they are guided to discover the in-depth value of a piece of writing by themselves via identifying and contrasting, expressing viewpoints and giving arguments. A well chosen text and challenging tasks ensure that learners will not get bored and will have something to say.

The involvement of the teacher is of extreme importance, the teacher is the one who guides the students through understanding and grasping the main ideas. S/he will not act as a provider of ready-made answers or prompter. What the teacher will do is asking the right questions, so that the learners deduce answers from situations depicted in the text.

Literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the student is actively involved in „teasing out” the unstated implications and assumptions of the text. Thus, by encouraging the students to grapple with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text, the teacher helps to develop their overall capacity to infer the meaning. It is not a rare occurrence at all for students to interpret language in context verbatim, thus creating more confusion than understanding. Dealing with literary texts at least once per week will definitely have an impact on developing skills of contextual interpretation. They will gradually develop an understanding that language units can perform a variety of functions conveying a huge number of meanings, according to the context. The teacher can illustrate multiple contextual meanings by providing different reading passages of both literary texts and non-literary ones and asking the students to compare the effects produced by certain usages in the given situations. An efficient strategy that we find really challenging deals with providing students with excerpts in the original and a translated version in their mother tongue and ask them to identify the differences between them.
and the effect certain language units create on them in both languages. Definitely, it requires more work on the teacher’s part as s/he will have to provide them with representative texts that will pique the learners’ curiosity and involve them actively in the task.

**Introducing diversity via literary texts**

An active literary lesson is not limited to students who are always raising their hands to answer and pedagogical activism should not be confused with fuss. An active heuristic strategy which the teacher uses during the literary class is the one that enables the student to learn by doing and by discovering the knowledge in order to achieve the learning task. The lessons during which the student just listens and becomes a passive reader, so-called dull lectures, are already outdated. The students are expected to examine the literary texts from different viewpoints, assuming different roles and interpreting meanings in accordance with the a broader context, involving a variety of sociolinguistic elements, aiming at perceiving irony or sarcasm in a paragraph, linguistic means that produce special effects etc. For example, „How We Kept Mother’s Day“ by Stephen Leacock can serve as an excellent resource to make students infer meanings, identify between figurative and direct meaning and participate in discussions about specific behavior patterns and attitudes towards or women in general in different cultures.

As the objective of language classes nowadays is learner oriented, aiming at developing their communicative competence, the literary text can be widely explored from this perspective, it offering countless contexts for students to communicate. An imaginative teacher will involve students in post-reading debates, changing the original context, or transposing the time and the place of the action, asking the students to imagine the characters in a different place at a different time, or asking them to perform dialogues, just changing some elements of the story, etc. Participating in contradictory debates on a literary passage is a method that produces a significant amount of genuine opinions among students and the teacher can only act as an observer who makes sure that every participant gets their turn to speak.

The teacher uses heuristic methods to lead the discussion with the students. Through inner speech students talk themselves through difficult tasks, planning and evaluating their options, and they talk to themselves as they appropriate various strategies to assist their performance. Language then, in this view, becomes a central tool not only for communication with others but also for communication with oneself, and cognition is inextricably intertwined with
language” (Singer, Bashir, 2004, p. 568). Teachers ought to leave their comfort zone and opt for the use of problem-solving teaching strategies and heuristic strategies to teach literary classes in order to achieve objectives of analysis, synthesis or strategies based on heuristic conversations or case study to achieve the objectives of the evaluation.

Studying literary texts for linguistic reasons does not imply that the students will keep strictly to its surface meaning. On the contrary, intense, diverse involvement and participation are crucial so that they understand it in-depth, analyze, criticize, and discover the its aesthetic value. In modern teaching, the teacher cannot be perceived only as the deliverer of information or the guide for all students, but as a partner and an organizer of the necessary activities for learning, keeping in mind the importance of differentiating tasks so that they tap into all the learners’ educational needs.

In high school, foreign language classes focusing on literary texts should be regarded as a diverse, dynamic space and an open dialogue with the authentic text. By that we simply mean that most works of literature are not deliberately created for the specific purpose of teaching a language. Learners are thus exposed to language that is genuine and undistorted and can be managed in the classroom context. Literature is a valuable complement to basic materials, especially once the initial survival level has been overcome. In reading literary texts, students have also to cope with the language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions on the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on (Collie, 1997). Another significant benefit the students gain from having access to literary texts in class deals to their developing pragmatic competence. Students who read literature are more skillful at perceiving implicates than those who do not.

Approaching literature depends on the act of reading, understanding and analyzing the reading world and experiences expressed in the literary work since reading is a personal experience, rich in linguistic and textual reflections. Interpretation reflects upon the pleasure of reading: admirable meetings with fictional worlds and visions upon the feelings, deep analyses and aesthetic enjoyment. As the main source of knowledge, as the space of searching for new knowledge, the reading process with informative purposes is the most important within the literary classes at school. The student who reads becomes an active partner in the act of reading, forming critical and reflective abilities, stimulating creativity and developing his emotions. Today, reading is not a passive form of reception, but it is a process that involves many factors: the
text, the author, the context, the reader, extending beyond literature. Therefore, teaching plans must be centered on the student-reader and on the elements involved in the act of reading. As follows, the textual structures are diversified and students must discover the meanings of the literary texts through the act of reading. Thus, there is a transition from approach centered on the text and on the emphasis of integrating elements to the student and learning the reading and interpretation strategies that transform him into an efficient reader. The teacher’s task is to develop and implement heuristic strategies to involve students in analyzing the literary text, enhancing their confidence. The reading competence is formed as students become capable readers, skillful at detecting both the formal structural elements and the depth of the studied texts.

Through instruction, the teacher has expectations of student learning outcomes. The outcomes of a teacher’s instructional decision include semantic and lexical knowledge, interpretation of text, discussion, written responses, knowledge acquisition, motivational changes, changes in attitudes, values and beliefs, insights into writer’s affect and cognition, and reflective insights into instruction. Characteristics of a high-quality learning environment include “useful feedback to students, meaningful demonstrations of language in action to engage students, and the development of learner responsibility for independence and self-direction”. All of these aspects are present in interactive reading classrooms. Through heuristic dialogues revolving around literary texts, the teacher and students construct meaning. “The texts and their interpretations exist in a hermeneutic circle. Thus, meaning construction and negotiation are viewed as fundamentally circular: meaning is continually changed, disputed, and discussed.” (Peregoy, 2005, p. 186). Meaning does not need to be agreed upon and a Writer’s meaning of a text might change over time based on new knowledge and understanding. Many factors influence the meaning making process including prior knowledge and classroom atmosphere.

Students also learn from interactions with each other and their environment created by their teacher due to heuristic methods. Through text-based discussions with peers, these students construct meaning and discover new knowledge. Making discoveries and having the pleasure of the experience of getting lost in a text, this is the pleasure of reading and students don’t want that experience to be taken away by the teacher who insists that the students have to “intellectualize” the literary text and reproduce their discoveries. (Fulwiler, 2002) Debating, stimulating discussions among students, avoiding any students’ inhibitions because of teacher’s authority, are student-centered factors that are crucial while analyzing the literary text, helping them through
their own development. While analyzing literary texts the teacher should take into account the following principles of reception:

- The text is the basic factor of the development of the communicative competence.
  The exploitation of the literary text from the perspective of developing communicative competence in EFL should be done in accordance with previously established objectives.
- The student should have a direct contact with the literary work, and the language structures they will acquire will be many and varied, helping him to formulate ideas in more precise and expressive ways.
- The teacher should be the facilitator, the guide who leads to new discoveries; s/he shouldn’t transmit the information openly.
- Reception of the meaning of literary text should comprise some of the aspects of the literary work, not the whole text, depending on the established objectives, e.g. ideas, themes, characters, motives, facts, events, relations, etc.
- The student should be put in a reflective situation regarding the text, express his personal point of view about the events, facts, characters. The analysis of a literary text at the secondary school level does not have any strict rules and requirements. We recommend following some steps under the teacher’s guidance.

**Stage 1.** The explanation of the text on primary level is the study of the text. At this level the activities of the explanation are directed towards understanding text as a whole, and entails first contact with the work, explanation of the words or word combinations, through different ways: synonyms, antonyms, giving Romanian equivalents, etc.

**Stage 2.** Commenting on/interpretation of the text. The literary comment from a structural, sociological, psychological, stylistic point of view is generally applied within specialized literary analysis. The literary comment is a personalized approach to literary work and its phenomena, decoding the meanings of the work, discovering the meanings from facts, pictures. To comment on a text means to disclose the textual elements as well as the sub-textual elements, and the means of their expressiveness, the way of transmitting some contents and significations, the means of organizing the message within the literary discourse. To comment on the text means to lead the students to analyze the text by the shortest way due to discovering of new ideas and new knowledge.
Stage 3. The literary analysis. Analysis is the practice of looking closely at small parts to see how they affect the whole. Literary analysis focuses on how plot/structure, character, setting, themes and many other techniques are used by the author to create meaning. To guide students toward discovering literature all on their own, the steps of this process need to be introduced in a simplified form. It’s very important for the students to understand that literary analysis is indeed a process where there is no right or wrong answer. This empowers students to be passionate about their topics and, most importantly, encourages them to look beyond the words on the page. To successfully analyze a text, the student will need to remember that authors make specific choices for particular reasons. The student should point out the author’s choices and attempt to explain their significance. Another way to look at a literary analysis is to consider a piece of literature from student’s own perspective. Rather than thinking about the author’s intentions, the student can develop an argument based on any single term (or combination of terms). The student just needs to use the original text to defend and explain his argument as the reader.

On a conclusive note, it is relevant to mention that teachers should not reject exploiting literary texts in class. They provide a whole bunch of benefits to learners and represent a valuable source of authentic language used in authentic contexts. Apart from the linguistic benefits that students can get without even being conscious of the process, literary texts develop a series of other competences: critical thinking, reflection, self-assessment, imagination and gives learners a sense of achievement and satisfaction and an opportunity to detach from reality.

REFERENCES