

# The Use of Literary Works in an EFL Class

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**Abstract**—English literature has not been considered a useful teaching tool in the EFL classrooms of many non-English speaking countries. This is because teaching L2 largely has been regarded as a matter of linguistics. However, Arthur (2006, p.200) points out, “Through the use of literature, a language learning experience might become at the same time a source of immediate pleasure and satisfaction for the student. This possibility makes literature an appealing teaching device for ESL teachers”. Certainly, today’s English teaching can have an intimate connection to literary works. Reading literature has a vital role to play in teaching foreign language readers that English is a rich, living language, and that literary works such as poems, short stories, novels, and plays are full of feelings and emotions, imagination and creativity. Nonetheless, while literature usage may motivate and encourage language acquisition, teachers should know how to utilize it. This paper provides a review of ideas and research regarding the role of literature in the EFL classroom. To this end, utilizing literature in the EFL classroom and the variety of approaches which can be employed are presented.

**Index Terms**—literary works, EFL learners, literature

## I. INTRODUCTION

English literature has not been considered a useful teaching tool in the EFL classrooms of many non-English speaking countries. This is because teaching L2 largely has been regarded as a matter of linguistics. The English teaching activity in public schools of these countries mainly focuses on teaching grammar. Following some general explanations of the rules of grammar, teachers assign the students drills consisting of unrelated sentences, and the students memorize the grammar rules. As for reading, special course hours are not devoted to developing the reading skills of the students. Dull textbook passages are used in the classroom. Vocabulary words are distributed, and the students are asked to memorize them. Then, the teacher asks questions about the reading. The answers to the questions are quickly found in the text without any specific attention. The students do not have to infer anything from the passage. Almost nothing is done to develop the students’ writing and speaking skills. In this system, teaching English is teacher-centered, and the students in these schools only memorize linguistic forms (grammar and vocabulary), instead of internalizing them. So, when the students are required to write or speak, they cannot produce anything.

While Hill asserts “In the sixties and seventies, in fact, there was a distinct reaction against the use of any literary English at all in the classroom, but now the pendulum has swung the other way ...” (1994, p.7), Arthur rejects him “Through the use of literature, a language learning experience might become at the same time a source of immediate pleasure and satisfaction for the student. This possibility makes literature an appealing teaching device for ESL teachers” (Arthur, 2006, p. 200).

Finding literary texts “difficult”, “hard to understand”, and “not relevant” to students’ lives are the main complaints from teachers and curriculum writers. A stanza from one of Shakespeare’s poems might not be so easy to understand for the L2 student. They might even drop out of their language education in frustration. Many EFL teachers and students see literature as a hindrance because the literary language is viewed as incomprehensible. The long texts of literary works are also often seen as one of the major difficulties. Besides, vocabulary and grammatical structures of these texts are often considered to be too complicated.

Another problem of using literary texts in EFL classrooms concerns culture. Duff and Maley (1990, p. 7), claim that cultural factors can present difficulties in a way that “it is clearly impossible for outsiders to share fully the range of references of an insider”. The texts of literary works can also cause problems if they are viewed as “carrying an undesirable freight of cultural connotations” (Collie and Slater, 1987, p. 2). It is commonly understood that a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis, but also certain features and characteristics of the culture. Since every culture has its own norms for conversation and these norms differ from one culture to another, some of the norms can be completely different and conflict with other cultures’ norms.

## II. DEFINITION OF ADVANTAGES OF LITERATURE

The negative point of views mentioned above might be caused by the lack of knowledge on the advantages of using literature, the criteria for selecting literary texts, and how to use the texts in classrooms. Better we have a look on these issues briefly; we can see the problems involved in using literature in EFL classrooms. Understanding these problems

precisely will enable us to identify the areas where teachers need to improve most in order to make the best use of literature in English teaching.

#### Features of Literature

1. Language Enrichment: Texts of literary works describe “things which mattered to the author when he or she wrote them”. Compared to the language samples in the textbooks, the language is far richer and more varied.

By asking students to explore the literary language, they will be encouraged to familiarize themselves with different language uses, forms, or conventions.

2. Cultural Enrichment: Literature also is a doorway into another culture, giving students the opportunity to eventually understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own. Students also can come to perceive traditions of thought, feeling, and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows.

3. Authentic Material: Literature includes all possible varieties of subject matter and language that might be intrinsically interesting. The texts are nontrivial, because they cover many significant themes and contexts which are missing in most EFL textbooks (Duff and Maley, 1990, p. 6).

4. Personal Involvement: Helping students see how literature relates to their lives usually makes them like literature. Texts of literary works are open to multiple interpretation and genuine interaction. When they try to comprehend the meaning of the text, learners must make inferences, drawing on both the content of the reading and their own experience. The use of literature yields many benefits. The most important justification is that literature can educate the whole person (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). Literature sharpens linguistic and cognitive skills and provides for some deepening of the students’ understanding of the human condition.

Roger Sell (1995, p.8) points out that “From the point of view of language education, the most important implication is that a knowledge of linguistic form – of words and grammar – is not enough. For the purposes of both comprehension and production, a learner also needs to develop a fully internalized grasp of the social and cultural environments within which the language in question is actually used”. He adds as well that “We know what the language means because, in certain types of context and language use within the culture, certain signifieds are associated with certain signifiers, and because language is used in certain ways in certain situational contexts” (Sell, 1995, p.9).

### III. HOW TO SELECT TEXTS FROM LITERARY WORKS

To minimize these difficulties, teachers should select appropriate texts from literary works for their students following these criteria:

1. Language proficiency: Teachers should select the texts of literary works from within students’ language proficiencies. If the students are not linguistically ready to deal with such texts, they can become frustrated. When the language of the literary work is quite straightforward and on the linguistic level of the students, they will want to read more literature and will find these texts more relevant to their experience. The abstract language of poetry and the length of novels may create problems in overcrowded classes. Employing literature so that students find it useful and enjoyable is a challenge for teachers in ESL classes.

2. Time availability: Drama can be used in classes, but it will be difficult to act out a play in crowded classes within limited course hours. Teachers should consider whether the texts can be integrated in the amount of class time available. When selecting texts from literary works, teachers should bear in mind whether they have enough time available to work on texts in class, how long students have to work on the text at home (reading), and how much background information on the text the teacher will need to provide.

3. Cultural Competence: The texts selected also should be within the teachers’ and students’ competence culturally. According to Carter and Long’s (1991, p.142) perspective, the theme of the texts must relate to some extent to the country or culture of the readers. Such literary works can touch upon a wide range of meaningful topics as identity, alienation, cultural clashes, and generational conflicts. Works of literature provide broad access to cultural experience.

4. Short story: The brevity of the text is important for the students because they will see that they can read, understand, and complete something in English. This will give the students a feeling of achievement and self-confidence. The aim of using the short story in teaching English is to encourage students to use what they have previously learned, and therefore, it is a student-centered teaching. Cultural elements in a literary text should be taken into consideration when choosing the text. The stories by English or American writers set in countries other than England and the United States, and reflecting the culture of these countries, will not be recommended to use in class, since developing cross-cultural understanding is not the aim of using the short story in ESL classes.

5. Personal involvement: Selecting texts that can stimulate a kind of personal involvement and arouse the learners’ interest is very crucial too. If the learners’ ideas, experiences, and needs are completely at variance with what they are asked to read, it is useless to expect them to be motivated. Sandra Lee McKay (2001, p. 322) and Wilga Rivers (1968, p. 230) point out that students read and enjoy a text if the subject-matter of the text is relevant to their life experience and interests. Recent trends in literary criticism have moved away from worrying about definitions and objectives for teaching literature and have focused more on pedagogy.

Recent L2 reading research shows that extensive reading helps improve students’ L2 language proficiency by focusing on the overall meaning of the text, rather than on linguistic aspects of the texts (Day & Bamford, 1998). This reading-for-meaning can be divided into two categories: efferent reading and aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). The

former type of reading aims at gaining information in a text, while the latter type aims at enjoying the experience of reading. Though these two reading positions are not mutually exclusive, efferent reading can be beneficial when students read such materials as newspapers and academic articles, while aesthetic reading can be more suited for reading literature.

The aesthetic reading of literature increases student motivation and further develops reading proficiency. Aesthetic reading also can be beneficial to writing and speaking. Aesthetic reading can be used not only for reading classes but can be successfully incorporated into writing and speaking classes as well.

Furthermore, literature develops the learner's interpretive abilities. Through literature, the learner can be encouraged to make inferences, understand multiple levels of meaning, and develop skills in critical thinking, as well as learn to accept ambiguities in the text. As Whalen (2010, p.11) points out, "reading narratives as literary works aids in cognitive development and critical thinking". In other words, literature expands the student's language and emotional awareness by simulating their imagination and help in developing critical skills.

Elsewhere, Jennifer Hill (1994) mentions three reasons for using literature as extensive reading:

- the possibility of internalizing the language and reinforcing points previously learned,
- a genuine language context and a focal point for the students in their own efforts to communicate, and
- motivation.

English reading should be meaningful for students so that reading does not simply mean language decoding activities and mechanical drills. Literature study also can provide a range of texts and an introduction to the many different varieties of English (p. 7).

A major problem of language teaching in the classroom is the creation of an authentic situation for language. A language classroom, especially one outside the community of native speakers, is isolated from the context of events and situations that produce natural language. In the case of literature, language creates its own context. The actual situation of the reader becomes immaterial as he or she takes on what D. W. Harding calls 'the role of the onlooker', looking on the events created by language. These events create, in turn, a context of situation for the language of the book and enable it to transcend the artificial classroom situation (p. 179).

Aside from the length of the work, there are some other important criteria that must be considered while choosing the text. Hill (1994, p. 15) points out the basic criteria to be kept in mind while choosing a literary text as follows:

- the needs and abilities of the students,
- the linguistic and stylistic level of the text, and
- the amount of background information required for a true appreciation of the material.

The vocabulary and sentence structure of the short story to be studied must be suitable to the level of the students. Short stories with archaic language, slang, foreign words, allusions, or language that imitates the speech of a particular locality, uneducated people, or foreigners must be avoided. Similarly, very long sentences are difficult for students to understand. As students will not understand these sentences and words, they will get bored and not read the work.

#### IV. HOW TO TEACH LITERATURE IN AN EFL CLASS

##### A. Lesson Plan

This sort of lesson plan works well for excerpts from short stories:

###### 1. Step one: Warm up

Warm up the students for the topic of the excerpt. This could take several forms: a short discussion that students do in pairs, a whole class discussion, a guessing game between you and the class, or a brainstorming of vocabulary around that topic.

###### 2. Step two: Before reading

- Pre-teach very difficult words (Note: Pre-teaching vocabulary should be approached with caution. Often teachers "kill" a text by spending too much time on the pre-teaching stage. Limit the amount of words you cover in this stage. If you have to teach more than seven or eight, there is a good chance the text will be too difficult.)

- Read the first bit of the excerpt (with their books closed or papers turned over) at normal speed, even quickly. Ask students to compare what they have understood in pairs. Then ask them to report back to you. Repeat the first bit again. Then ask them to open the book (or turn over the page) and read it for themselves.

###### 3. Step three: Understanding the text, general comprehension

Read the whole thing to the students so that they can get more of a "feel" for the text. Then let the students read it to themselves. It is important to let students approach a piece of literature the first time without giving them any specific task other than to simply read it. Then ask comprehension questions or ask them to explain the significance of certain key words of the text. Another way to check comprehension is to ask students to explain to each other (in pairs) what they have understood. This could be followed up by more subjective questions (e.g.: Why do you think X said this?)

###### 4. Step four: Understanding the language

At this stage, come to grips with the more difficult words in the text. See how many of the unfamiliar words students can get from context. Give them clues. Then look at the connotation of the words the author has chosen.

###### 5. Step five: Follow-up activities

- Have a discussion on issues the short story raised and how they relate to the students' lives.

### B. Using Excerpts from Stories or Short Stories

- Ask students to write what they think will happen next, or what they think happened just before.
- Ask students to write a background character description of one of the characters which explains why they are the way they are.
- Ask students to personalize the text by discussing if anything similar has happened to them.
- Ask students to improvise a role play between two characters in the book.

## V. CONCLUSION

Literature may motivate and encourage language acquisition. Certainly, English teaching today can have an intimate connection to literary works. Reading literature has a vital role to play in teaching foreign language readers that English is a rich, living language, and that literary works such as poems, short stories, novels, and plays are full of feelings and emotions, imagination and creativity.

Among literary forms, the short story seems to be the most suitable one to use in public high schools in teaching English. But stories that require detailed background knowledge will be difficult for students to understand it and they will get bored. The teacher should choose a story that students can follow easily. As Alemi (2010,p.28) points out “selecting a difficult short story from a well-known writer such as T.S. Eliot as a teaching tool for EFL students is a challenging approach”. Thus, the difficulty level of a literary work should match the proficiency level of the students.

Besides, evaluation shouldn't immediately follow the reading of the passage. Students may become accustomed to taking a test just after reading a text and may anticipate it rather than simply enjoying the story. If they don't enjoy the story or the literary text, they may stray from learning the language. Moreover, as Bagherkazemi & Alemi (2010, p. 11) state “EFL material developers, syllabus designers and teachers should select the most appropriate approach or combination of approaches, design activities and tasks and make the most out of literature to enhance language learning and teaching by analyzing the idiosyncratic features of the classroom, educational system and culture in which they will be used”.

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