

Literature Mediated English in the UCM Degree in Modern Languages: A Pilot Study

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Abstract—The Degree in Modern Languages recently implemented by the Complutense University of Madrid has been designed in the light of the European Higher Education criteria. In the case of English, the curriculum includes a B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) course of general English, with the consequent lack of motivation of many of the students in the classroom, who already got that level at high school. In this sense, it is our intention to carry about a pilot study intended to design, implement and test the use of literary texts and articles in the ESL classroom.

Index Terms—ESL, literature, curriculum, Higher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The European Curriculum standards for Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education are being currently reformed, in the light of the Bologna Process, to achieve the new goal of forming active and bilingual learners able to study and work abroad, with a taste for different cultures and traditions—The official Bologna Process website (2007–2010). Though most of Spanish universities are struggling to meet the requirements of the Bologna plan in terms of language policy, the results are not satisfactory enough—English Proficiency Index (Spain EF EPI, 2012). The lack of a suitable syllabus and of proper teaching materials seems to be one of the most frequent complains among language teachers. For Dörnyei (1994), these elements of the language course represent important motivational components, therefore they should be “interesting, relevant expected and satisfactory for the L2” (p. 277). Thus, in the case of the new UCM Degree in Modern Languages under study, the curriculum includes a B2 course of general English, with the consequent decrease of motivation of many of the students in the classroom, who already got that level at high school.

The actual lack of positive results leads us to consider that the use of authentic materials—original literary texts included—in the language classroom could be one possible step towards the achievement of the Bologna demands in Spain. Multiple studies point to the need for authentic texts in ESL teaching (Swaffar, 1999; Arens and Swaffar, 2000; Dupuy, 2000). There is also a recent claim for a curriculum “in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuum” (Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World, 2007). More specifically, the benefits of literary texts for the ESL curriculum have been equally defended (Rice, 1991; Van, 2009).

These premises made, the present study is aimed at analyzing the use of literature as a motivational component. It also tries to evaluate the benefits of a language syllabus based on literature. Therefore, our intention is to carry about a pilot study intended to design, implement and test the use of literary texts and articles in the ESL classroom. To achieve this latter aim, the students’ opinions on the use of literature will be gathered and analyzed as a starting point for future implementation and research.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our interest in the motivational properties of literature in the ESL classrooms is a part of a long and vexed scholarly conversation, one in which experts have vacillated between incorporating and abolishing literature as a part of the academic curriculum.

Nowadays, though, research is still being conducted in this field to demonstrate the positive results of using literature in different ESL teaching areas. Thus, Elliott (1990) and De Blasé (2005) describe the successful experience of integrating language and drama activities with literature in a mutually supportive way. Hess (1999) and Hur (2005) depict the multidimensional advantages of literature as a means for developing ESL skills. Meanwhile, McVee et al. (2008) defends the use of poetry as texts with rich potential for multiple interpretations in the language classroom. Also, Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) portray the benefits of literary texts as an essential part of integrative language teaching.

When it comes to the actual incorporation of literature into the ESL curriculum, it is worth mentioning that the last century has seen a number of different attempts in this sense (Wellek and Warren, 1980; Carter and Long, 1991). Nevertheless, most scholars indicate that none of these approaches is complete enough to be put to practice

independently (Maley, 1989; Lima, 2005; Van, 2009). For this reason, a number of integrative models towards teaching English through literature—that include linguistic, cultural and personal elements—have been developed in the last decades (Timucin, 2001; Savvvidou, 2004; Divsar and Tahriri, 2009).

The above-mentioned approaches are systematically reconciled in the Tasmanian Integrative Model for literature teaching, developed by an Australian group of scholars (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012). As reviewed by Bobkina and Dominguez (2014), in the Tasmanian Model, literary texts are to be approached not only from a linguistic point of view, but also from a social, cultural, and a literary perspective:

i) The Cultural Heritage Perspective supports the view that literature embodies the history, tradition, wisdom and beliefs of a particular society.

ii) The Language Skills Perspective considers students to work with texts for reading, writing, listening and speaking skill acquisition.

iii) The Personal Growth Perspective defends the idea that language learning is a holistic, natural process in which meaning is constantly built by students.

iv) The Functional Perspective focuses on the analysis of the grammatical structures of language and the identification of the relation existing among, language form, register, and context.

v) The Critical Literacy Perspective supports the view that texts are social constructs reflecting the beliefs and values of their time and culture, with multiple meanings conditioned by the structure of the discourse, the emphases and the omissions (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012).

III. THE USE OF LITERARY TEXTS IN THE ESL UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM: A PILOT STUDY IN THE UCM DEGREE IN MODERN LANGUAGES

A. Method

In order to identify Modern Languages students' views on the use of a syllabus based on literature components one single questionnaire has been designed. The intention is to assess students' opinions on the previous implementation of the language sessions focused on literature according to the paradigms of the Integrative Approach Model described in the section above (See the sample provided in Appendix 2). The usefulness of this model in terms of developing language skills, grammar and vocabulary concepts, personal growth, as well as cultural knowledge criteria, has been thus tested. Results will be quantitatively presented first to be later on analyzed qualitatively. Our expectations are that the conclusions and the pedagogical implications derived from the discussion of these results will serve as a starting point for future implementation and research.

B. Participants

Participants were 36 second year undergraduate students of the Degree in Modern Languages depending on the School of Humanities of the UCM and taking English as a core subject. The average age of the respondents was about 23 years old. Among them, an 82% had Spanish as their mother tongue while only an 18% were native speakers of other European languages such as Romanian, Russian, German and Italian.

C. Instruments

Students were asked to answer a questionnaire aimed at collecting their views on the use of literature as a part of the English language syllabus (Appendix 1). The questionnaire, divided into 5 sections, included 20 questions scored on a five-point Likert Scale—from 1= Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree. Following the guidelines of the Tasmanian Integrative Model (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012), the questions were grouped into five blocks, each reflecting a different point of view to the literary texts, namely, a linguistic, social, cultural, and a literary one. The first section was intended to gather data on students' opinion towards literature as an element fostering the development of language skills. The second section was expected to elicit students' views regarding the possibility of an improvement when it comes to the use of language. Meanwhile, the third and the fourth sections were meant to evaluate the students' satisfaction in terms of personal growth and cross-cultural knowledge acquisition. Finally, the fifth section included four statements aimed to provide students' overall evaluation of the English classes based on literature, as well as to get their opinion on the possibility of including literature components into the language syllabus. These included open questions like i) Give your overall evaluation of the English classes based on literature, ii) Do you find them useful in terms of language acquisition?, iii) Comment the advantages and disadvantages of using literature in the language classroom and iv) Would you like to have more literature components in your regular English classes?

D. Procedures

Six weeks were required for the implementation of the materials included in the teaching guides based on the use of authentic literary texts in English for the ESL classroom that had been previously developed for that purpose. Each session lasted 90 minutes and was based on a specific literary genre. In particular, the following literary texts were selected: Short Story *Scandal in Bohemia* by Conan Doyle; Poetry *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe, and Narrative *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. The work on each of the texts was designed according to the criteria of the Tasmanian Five-Perspective Approach; as previously mentioned in the theoretical background section of the present work, an

integrative model for teaching literature developed by an Australian group of scholars (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012). The model includes five different perspectives that are embedded into the teaching process: the Cultural perspective, the Language Skills Perspective, the Personal Growth Perspective, the Functional perspective and the Critical Literacy one.

To illustrate the five perspective model, a sample of a literature-based teaching guide has been included in Appendix 2. Though the model covers the five perspectives, in practice a unit of work might focus on two or three of the perspectives or include elements of the five of them. A process such as this is a useful tool for teachers in planning an appropriate, rich and balanced English program for their students.

Right after the implementation process took place, the questionnaire was administered and the data collected was analyzed both in a qualitative and a quantitative way. The obtained results are expected to constitute a point of departure for further implementation and research.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section is divided into four main sub-sections following the organization pattern of the distribution of items in the questionnaire administered to the students: (i) language skills, (ii) use of language (iii) personal growth, iv) cultural heritage and v) students' overall evaluation.

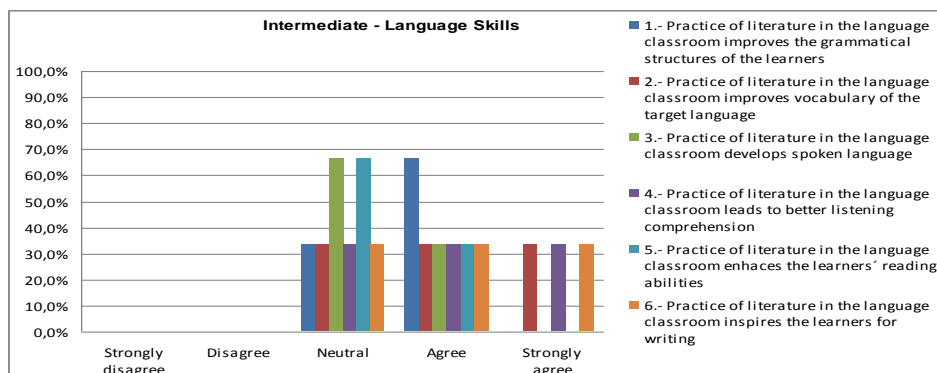
A. Language Skills

The language skill section of the questionnaire includes 6 questions which, as shown in Table 1 below, revealed the following results in total numbers: 55.6% of the participants under study agreed or strongly agreed with the idea posed in question number 1.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom improves the grammatical structures of the learners*, with a 38.9% of neutral responses. Questions 3.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom develops spoken language* and 4.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom leads to better listening comprehension* revealed equally weak results, with a 61.1% who agreed or strongly agreed versus a 11.1% who openly disagreed in the first case, and a 50% who agreed or strongly agreed facing another 50% of participants who self reported to remain neutral or to disagree with item number 4. Much more positive global results were obtained in questions 2.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom improves vocabulary of the target language*—88.9% agreed or strongly agreed while only one 11.1% remained neutral, 5.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances the learners' reading abilities* —83.2% agreed or strongly agreed with a 16.7% of neutral responses—and 6.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom inspires the learners for writing*—83.47% agreed or strongly agreed while only a 16.7% remained neutral.

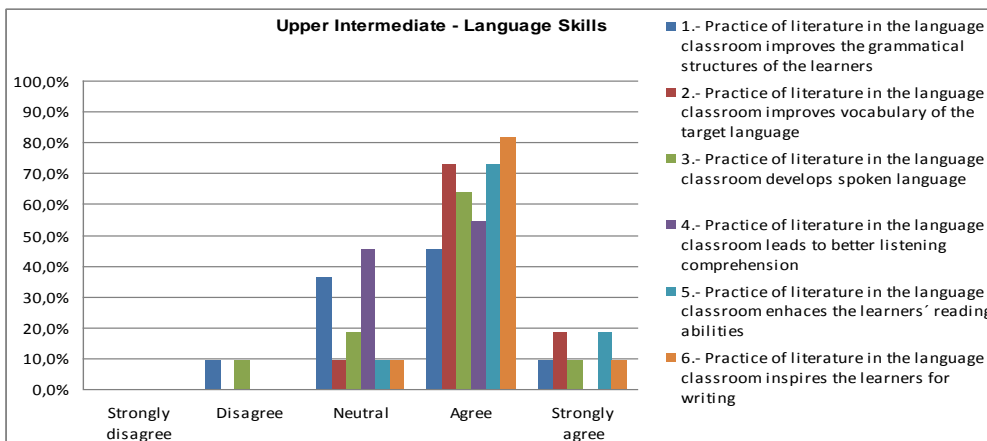
TABLE 1.
OVERALL RESULTS FOR THE LANGUAGE SKILLS SECTION

Language Skills			
1.- Practice of literature in the language classroom improves the grammatical structures of the learners		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	14	38,9%
(4)	Agree	16	44,4%
(5)	Strongly agree	4	11,1%
Total		36	100,0%
2.- Practice of literature in the language classroom improves vocabulary of the target language		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	4	11,1%
(4)	Agree	22	61,1%
(5)	Strongly agree	10	27,8%
Total		36	100,0%
3.- Practice of literature in the language classroom develops spoken language		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	4	11,1%
(3)	Neutral	10	27,8%
(4)	Agree	18	50,0%
(5)	Strongly agree	4	11,1%
Total		36	100,0%
4.- Practice of literature in the language classroom leads to better listening comprehension		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	4	11,1%
(3)	Neutral	14	38,9%
(4)	Agree	14	38,9%
(5)	Strongly agree	4	11,1%
Total		36	100,0%
5.- Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances the learners' reading abilities		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	6	16,7%
(4)	Agree	20	55,6%
(5)	Strongly agree	10	27,8%
Total		36	100,0%
6.- Practice of literature in the language classroom inspires the learners for writing		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	6	16,7%
(4)	Agree	24	66,7%
(5)	Strongly agree	6	16,7%
Total		36	100,0%

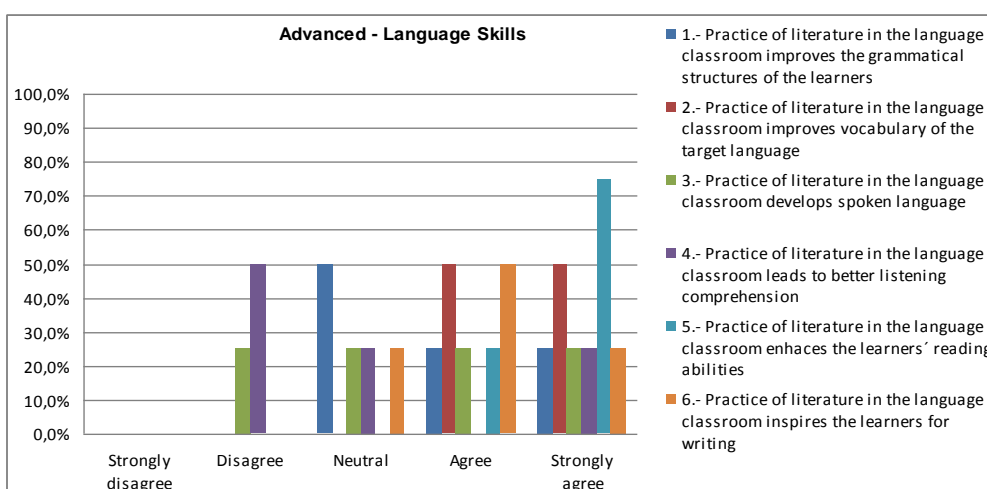
Partial results for this first section focused on Language Skills, according to the participants' levels of English, are shown in Graphs 1, 2 and 3 below:



Graph 1. Intermediate level students: analysis of results for the language skills section



Graph 2. Upper-Intermediate level students: analysis of results for the language skills section



Graph 3. Advanced level students: analysis of results for the language skills section

As shown in Graphs 1, 2 and 3 above, the highest percentages of positive answers—agree/completely agree—as far as the improvement of language skills concern is common among the students of upper-intermediate and advanced levels, with values surpassing 80% for most of the items. In particular, these students remarked the usefulness of a literature syllabus for the development of reading skills—over 90% of students, enhancing student’s writing abilities—90% and 70% respectively, as well as for the improvement of vocabulary—over 90% of the students.

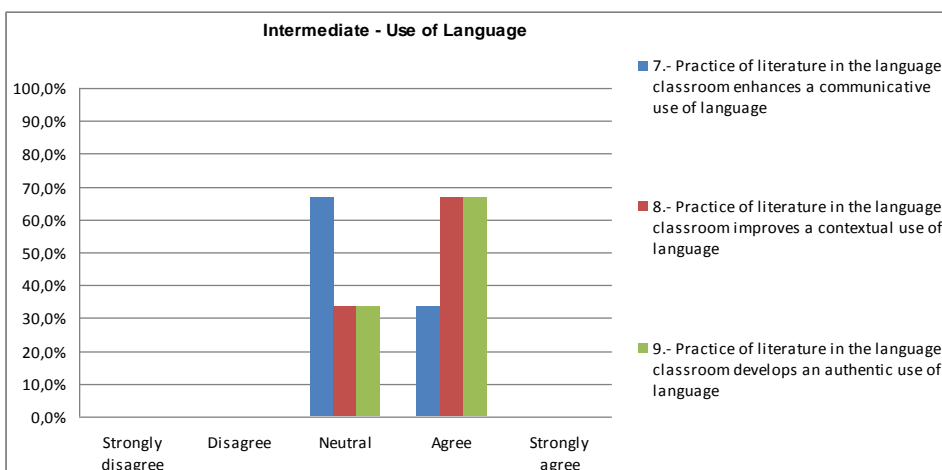
B. Use of Language

This second section of the questionnaire consists of three items: 7.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances a communicative use of language*, 8.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom improves a contextual use of language*, and 9.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom develops an authentic use of language*. Table 2 below shows the global results obtained, which are quite revealing in the sense that use of language does not seem to be as favoured by the practice of literature as the language skills happened to be in the preceding section. The three items got similar results though: 55.6% who agreed or strongly agreed in items 7 and 8, and 50% in item 9.

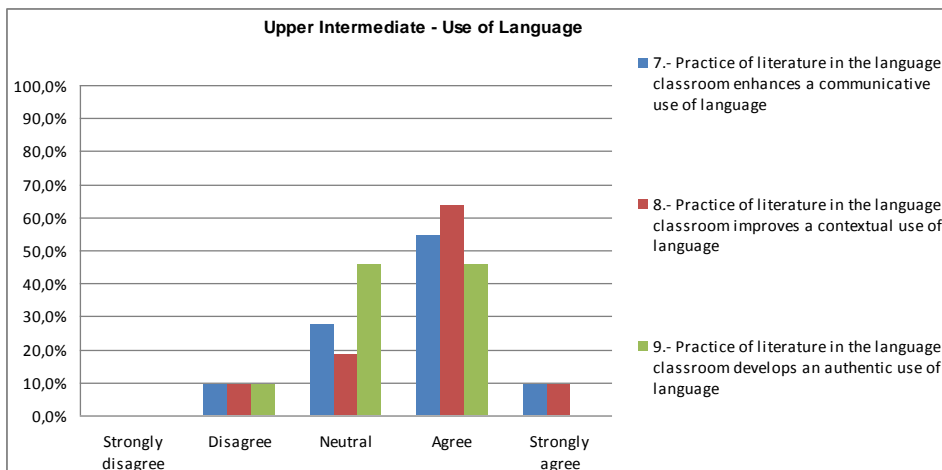
TABLE 2.
OVERALL RESULTS FOR THE USE OF LANGUAGE SECTION

Use of Language			
7.- Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances a communicative use of language		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	14	38,9%
(4)	Agree	18	50,0%
(5)	Strongly agree	2	5,6%
Total		36	100,0%
8.- Practice of literature in the language classroom improves a contextual use of language		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	14	38,9%
(4)	Agree	18	50,0%
(5)	Strongly agree	2	5,6%
Total		36	100,0%
9.- Practice of literature in the language classroom develops an authentic use of language		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	16	44,4%
(4)	Agree	16	44,4%
(5)	Strongly agree	2	5,6%
Total		36	100,0%

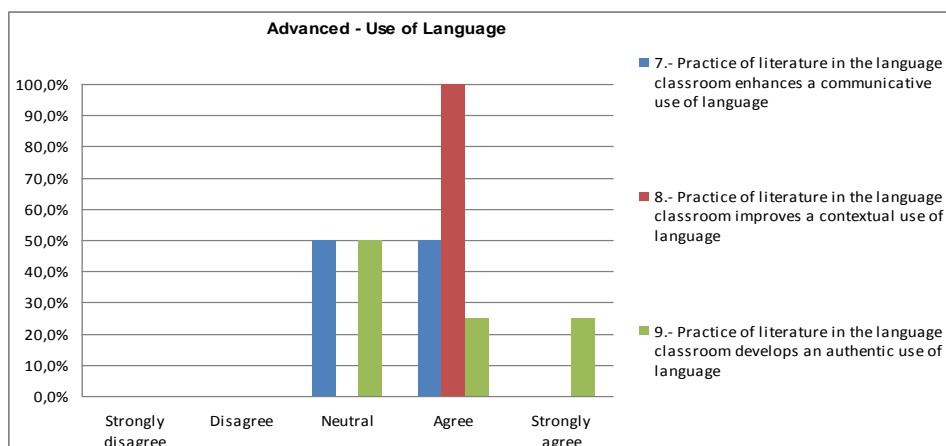
Partial results according to levels obtained for the Use of Language section are shown in Graphs 4, 5 and 6 below:



Graph 4. Intermediate level students: analysis of results for the Use of Language section



Graph 5. Upper-Intermediate level students: analysis of results for the Use of Language section



Graph 6. Advanced level students: analysis of results for the Use of Language section

Graphs 4, 5 and 6 above illustrate the fact that intermediate students appreciate literature as a means of improving contextual and authentic use of language—about 70% of students. Meanwhile, upper intermediate and advanced level students reported to stress its helpfulness in terms of a communicative—65% and 50% respectively—and a contextual use of the language—75% and 100% respectively.

C. Personal Growth

The Personal Growth section includes five questions: 10.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom develops a better understanding of life*, 11.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom matures critical thinking*, 12.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom engages the learners' emotions*, 13.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom improves creative use of language*, and 14.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances imaginative abilities*. Total results obtained for each of these questions are shown in Table 3 below, where most of the participants reported to agree or to strongly agree with the idea that the practice of literature in the language classroom matures critical thinking—83.4%. A high proportion of the respondents—77.8%—similarly agreed or strongly agreed with the use of literature as a means to improve a creative use of language and to enhance imaginative abilities while a quite close 72.2% considered that this practice facilitates a better understanding of life. However, only 50% of the participants under study seemed to see the practice of literature as an adequate tool to engage the learners' emotions, with a 38.9% of neutral responses and a poor 11.1% who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

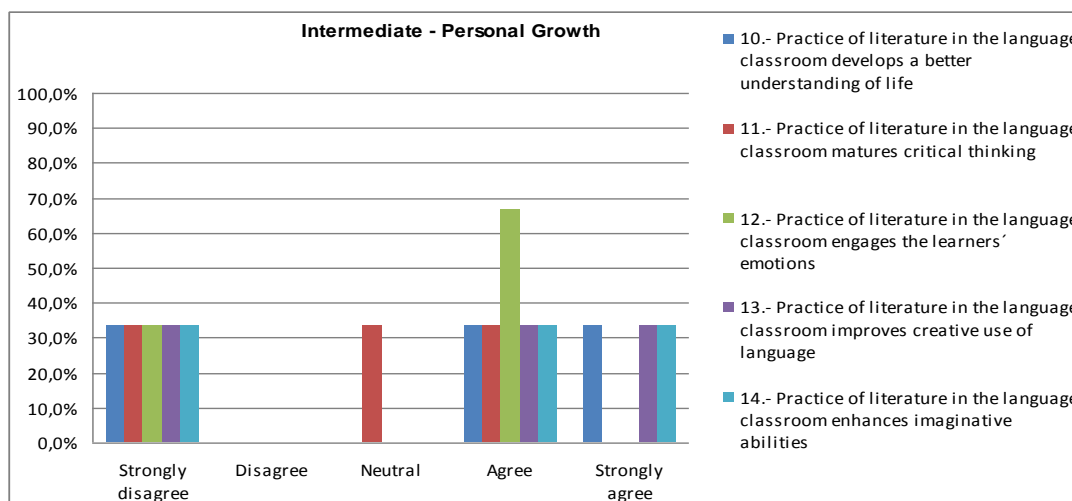
TABLE 3.
OVERALL RESULTS FOR THE PERSONAL GROWTH SECTION

Personal Growth			
10.- Practice of literature in the language classroom develops a better understanding of life		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	2	5,6%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	6	16,7%
(4)	Agree	14	38,9%
(5)	Strongly agree	12	33,3%
Total		36	100,0%
11.- Practice of literature in the language classroom matures critical thinking		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	2	5,6%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	4	11,1%
(4)	Agree	20	55,6%
(5)	Strongly agree	10	27,8%
Total		36	100,0%
12.- Practice of literature in the language classroom engages the learners' emotions		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	2	5,6%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	14	38,9%
(4)	Agree	19	52,8%
(5)	Strongly agree	0	0,0%
Total		36	100%

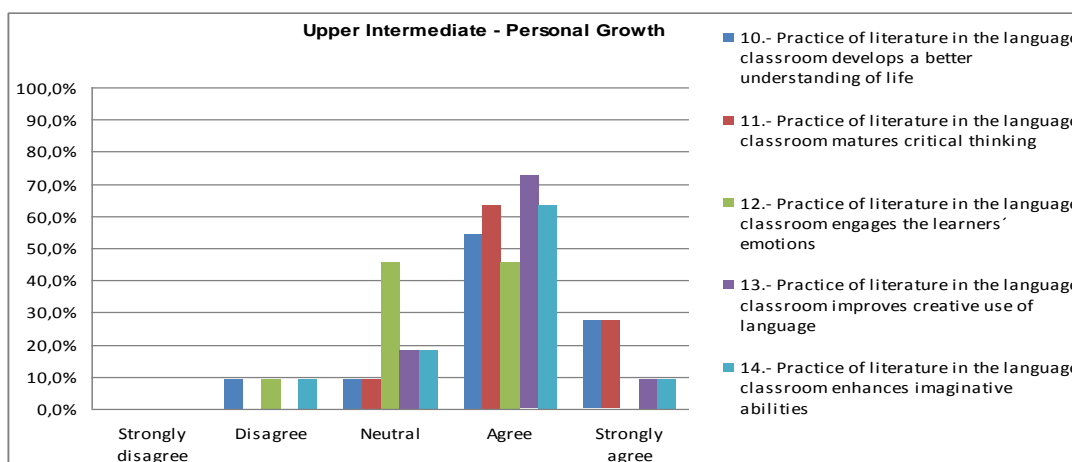
13.- Practice of literature in the language classroom improves creative use of language		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	2	5,6%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	6	16,7%
(4)	Agree	22	61,1%
(5)	Strongly agree	6	16,7%
Total		36	100,0%

14.- Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances imaginative abilities		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	2	5,6%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	4	11,1%
(4)	Agree	22	61,1%
(5)	Strongly agree	6	16,7%
Total		36	100,0%

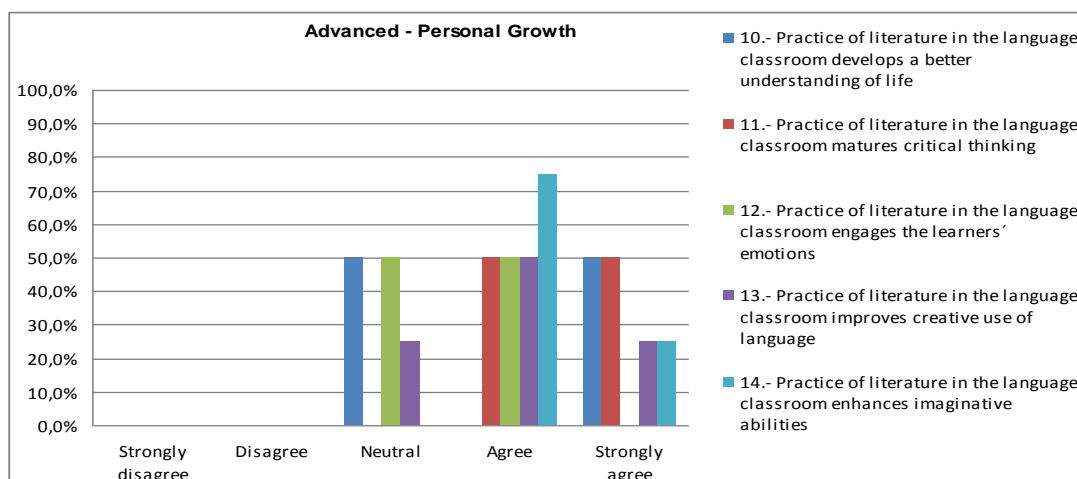
Partial results according to levels obtained for the Use of Language section of the questionnaire are shown in Graphs 7, 8 and 9 below:



Graph 7. Intermediate level students: analysis of results for the Personal Growth section



Graph 8. Upper-intermediate level students: analysis of results for the Personal Growth section



Graph 9. Advanced level students: analysis of results for the Personal Growth section

As shown in Graphs 7, 8, and 9 above, there is an important difference between the students in the intermediate level and those in the upper-intermediate and advanced levels. The advanced level students identified literature as a valuable tool for developing critical thinking—100%, improving creative use of language—75%—and developing imaginative abilities—90%. Similar values were revealed by upper-intermediate students, who stressed the usefulness of a literature based syllabus when it comes to developing critical thinking—90%—and a better understanding of life—85%, as much as improving a creative use of language—85%. On the contrary, intermediate level students happened to be more reserved in their appreciations, with a 30% of them strongly disagreeing with the statements presented in this third section of the questionnaire.

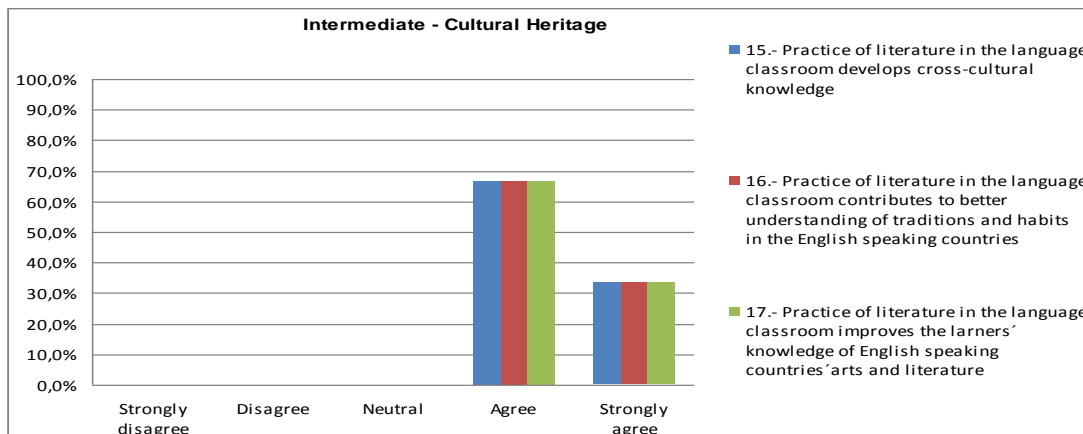
D. Cultural Heritage

Three questions were included in this Cultural Heritage section with the following total results obtained: 15.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom develops cross-cultural knowledge*, with a 83,3% of the respondents who agreed or strongly agreed and only a 16,7% who remain neutral; 16.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom contributes to better understanding of traditions and habits in the English speaking countries*, where a great majority of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed 94,4% with this idea despite a minor 5,6% of them who disagreed; and 17.- *Practice of literature in the language classroom improves the learners' knowledge of English speaking countries' arts and literature*, where results equalled those of item 16, the only difference being in the fact that the minor 5,6% corresponds to those who self-reported to strongly disagree.

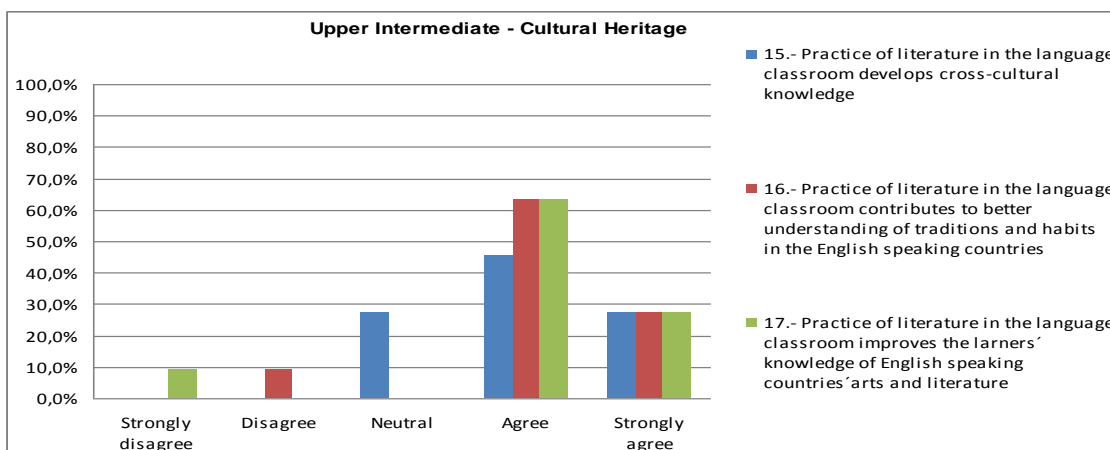
TABLE 4. OVERALL RESULTS FOR THE CULTURAL HERITAGE SECTION

Cultural Heritage			
15.- Practice of literature in the language classroom develops cross-cultural knowledge		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	6	16,7%
(4)	Agree	16	44,4%
(5)	Strongly agree	14	38,9%
Total		36	100,0%
16.- Practice of literature in the language classroom contributes to better understanding of traditions and habits in the English speaking countries		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	0	0,0%
(2)	Disagree	2	5,6%
(3)	Neutral	0	0,0%
(4)	Agree	22	61,1%
(5)	Strongly agree	12	33,3%
Total		36	100,0%
17.- Practice of literature in the language classroom improves the learners' knowledge of English speaking countries' arts and literature		Frequency	Ratio
(1)	Strongly disagree	2	5,6%
(2)	Disagree	0	0,0%
(3)	Neutral	0	0,0%
(4)	Agree	24	66,7%
(5)	Strongly agree	10	27,8%
Total		36	100,0%

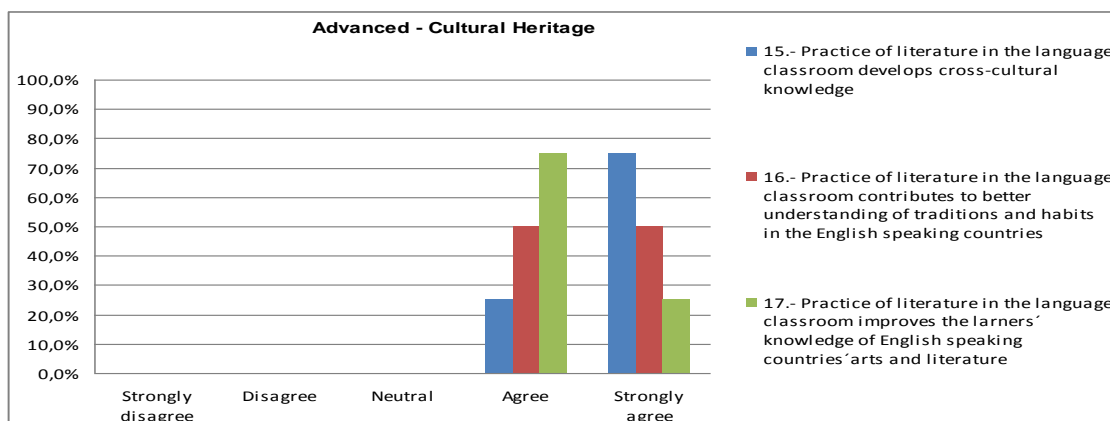
Partial results according to levels obtained for the Use of Cultural Heritage section are shown in Graphs 10, 11 and 12 below:



Graph 10. Intermediate level students: analysis of results for the Cultural Heritage section



Graph 11. Upper-intermediate level students: analysis of results for the Cultural Heritage section



Graph 12. Advanced level students: analysis of results for the Cultural Heritage section

Graphs 10, 11 and 12 above clearly show the homogeneity of opinions among the students of different levels concerning the value of literature in terms of cultural heritage. Most of them clearly approve literature as a means of developing cross-cultural knowledge and a better understanding of English culture and traditions.

E. Students' Overall Evaluation

The results derived from the questionnaire reveal that English classes based on literature are generally considered by students to be useful to achieve fluency at the highest levels and to learn new vocabulary and grammar structures as well as to get cultural background knowledge of the English speaking countries.

In terms of language acquisition, though, students tend to consider that these English mediated classes do mostly help to develop reception skills like reading and writing more than the productive listening or writing skills. In this sense, the

disadvantages of this literature based English teaching found by the students are mainly related to the focus being on reading with no time to develop the other, speaking and listening, skills. Possible problems regarding the adequacy of the level of the texts to the actual level of the students were also pointed. Advantages go through learning vocabulary in context and getting familiarized with structures that can be useful for future writing. Students reported that they would like to have more literature components in their language classes in the case literary texts always presented the adequate degree of difficulty. Some of them considered that these texts were to be used only for the reading part of the lesson while other skills should be equally developed.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Success in language acquisition is often determined by students' interest and enthusiasm for the material used in the language classroom, their degree of persistence with the learning task, and their level of concentration and enjoyment (Crook and Schmidt, 1991). This type of students' personal involvement might come from the materials and lessons used in the classroom. With that purpose in mind, this study has been intended to show how beneficial literature-based teaching can be for ESL students. Even if results reveal that high-level English language students are the only ones who seem to be more positive towards the use of literary texts as a teaching tool, literature has been proved to be a highly useful tool for ESL students. Overall results have shown that literature as a language tool might be especially valuable for mastering a number of language skills, in particular, reading and writing comprehension, as well as developing a contextual and authentic use of language. Besides, it contributes positively to maturing students' critical thinking and enhancing their imaginative abilities, definitely leading to a better understanding of traditions, habits and culture of the English speaking countries. We hope that the research described in the article will facilitate teachers' effective use of literature to improve English instruction.

APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE

USE OF LITERATURE FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

1. Strongly disagree.
2. Disagree.
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree.

Tick the appropriate digit.

N°	ITEM	1	2	3	4	5
1	Practice of literature in the language classroom provides a rich source of language learning.					
2	Practice of literature in the language classroom matures our thinking.					
3	Practice of literature in the language classroom develops communicative use of language.					
4	Practice of literature in the language classroom develops the contextual use of language.					
5	Practice of literature in the language classroom is a refined tool for language learning.					
6	Practice of literature in the language classroom improves the grammatical structures of the learners.					
7	Practice of literature in the language classroom inspires us for critical thinking.					
8	Practice of literature in the language classroom improves our language skills.					
9	Practice of literature in the language classroom improves vocabulary of the target language.					
10	Practice of literature as an informal discourse develops our spoken language.					
11	Practice of literature in the language classroom develops authentic use of language.					
12	Practice of literature in the language classroom develops cross cultural understanding of different cultures.					
13	Practice of literature in the language classroom develops better understanding of life.					
14	Practice of literature in the language classroom engages our emotions.					
15	Practice of literature in the language classroom enhances our imaginative abilities					
16	Literature being a source of entertainment develops language efficiently.					
17	When studying at school, I used to work with English poetry.					
18	When studying at school, I used to work with English narrative literature.					
19	My experience of working with literature was mainly positive.					
20	I would like to include literature into the English language curriculum.					

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