

“THE USE OF LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH CLASS”

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Abstract

This article intends to revise the different applications of literary texts in the language class, in a non-native environment, that there have been according to the different periods or approaches. The new proposition consists in making use of all the possibilities the text provides, taking advantage of the partial exploitation of the texts presented by different approaches and creating a more comprehensive, over-all task that will accompany the language processes.

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When I started to consider the meaning of this title I thought of two possibilities: THE use of literature or the USES of literature in the Language class. I definitely stand for the second option. Literature can be used in the English class for many more purposes than we usually do.

To begin with, literature is, above all, an expression of art created to communicate feelings, thoughts and ideas. Still, language is the necessary vehicle to communicate them, so we face these beautiful pieces of writing, expressed in the language we are trying to teach. That is when we are tempted to choose literary writings for the English class.

We shouldn't forget that we are talking about making use of English literature in a non-native context, in which the foreign language is the first concern. The usual questions, about which there is little agreement among teachers, are:

- ❖ What do we teach when we use literary texts?
- ❖ What kind of texts is worth working with?
- ❖ What can we use the literary texts for?
- ❖ How can we make our students like, enjoy literary texts?

For the **first question**: what do we teach when we use literary texts?

There is more than one answer. It will all depend on the aim of a specific class and the aim of the course in general. So this question is intimately related to another issue: what texts are we going to use? , and then, what for?

The use of these texts for the study of literature is evident, and the traditional study of literature in its three-dimension scope: history, theory and criticism is the one usually reserved for the Literature class. But this is certainly not the only possible use. We can take advantage as teachers of the language that the text provides and we can also consider the cultural background of the text.

The **second question**: what kind of texts is worth working with?

Has to do with this other usual question: what is the best criteria to choose the literary text? First of all, the choice will depend on the needs you are trying to satisfy, but the general criteria would be: use miscellanea.

Everything is useful. And basically, the use you make of the text chosen depends solely on your common sense. Use books, be it complete or abridged versions, videos, anything.

When I say that the choice will depend on the teacher's common sense I mean to say that it is the teacher the one who should know in which case, for what group and for what purpose he should choose each possible version.

The **third question** has had many different answers, depending on the period we are talking about, or the approach we follow. So, what can we use the literary texts for? Historically, literary texts were used to have literary analysis made, so then they were only considered for the Literature class; later they were re-taken as authentic material to help the teacher deal only with language.

Let's see:

- In the 1900's Literature was considered of high prestige in the study of a language, so this approach was characterized by the concentration on the classics: students would improve their own performance if exposed to the best uses of the language (Widdowson, Short and Cadin). However, the difficulty to non-native students and the lack of a consistent and suitable methodology brought about an unexpected effect: an enthusiastic teacher-orator and passive, bored students, unable to respond to the text (Long). The literary text gradually disappeared from the language class, and as from the 60's onwards

structuralism, with emphasis on correctness in the grammatical form seemed incompatible with the teaching of literature.

- When we come to the 70's and early 80's, the advent of the Communicative Approach emphasized the study of language for practical purposes, but literature has no practical uses, so for this approach it had no place in the Language classroom. Widdowson then argued that language learning is more than training; it should have something to do with education as well.
- During the 80's there was a re-awakening of interest in literature. Linguists and scholars supported the value of teaching literature and also of inventing a new pedagogical approach for non-native speakers: thus, the interface of literature and language teaching resulted in the students' responses to the text. Consistently with the spreading of this idea we find the design and publication of several books that attempt to bridge the gap between literature and language studies, introduce the students to some of the finest exponents of literature in English, help them understand and use the language through the reading and discussion of the literary texts. Gower even adds that exercises are designed to further appreciation of the texts by showing how the different features of style and language work together to create the whole.

This proposition is different: use the literary text for the purpose it is best suited. Combine activities, squeeze the texts in every possible way, be creative and make your students learn the language as they enjoy good writing.

Reportedly, literature encapsulates the accumulated wisdom, the best that has been thought and felt within a culture (Carter-Long), so we can use the texts that best show this to enhance the understanding of the culture, which will eventually lead to a better performance in the language in the case of non-native students. Now, since literature is made from language, if students are systematically exposed to works of literature, they will develop their literary competence too.

The argument that lies behind this statement is that students will enrich and develop their language input because of the contact with some of the most varied and subtle creative uses of the language. (Back to the 20's).

A third proposition aims at personal growth, and highlights the need of the students' engagement with the reading of literary texts; in this case, literature is a resource, students should be able to make the texts their own and develop a continuous love and appreciation of literature which continues beyond the classroom.

Last, how can we make our students enjoy literature?

This one is more difficult to answer. It actually has to do with motivation. We always try to motivate our students, so this case would be no exception. We, teachers usually work on the assumed interests of our students, so we should choose the texts that will appeal to the students age and concerns.

The use of literature in the language class should tend to elicit the student's responses to the text, guiding them to a personal discovery. As a resource, the literary text should be used to enrich vocabulary while motivating students and providing an opportunity for their education and understanding of another culture.

Finally, literature in the language class should be explored in the light of a learner-centered approach, i.e. a broadly - based endeavour designed to gear language teaching, in terms of both the content and the form of instruction, around the needs and characteristics of learners (Tudor).

The role of the teacher then becomes very relevant: he should enable and co-ordinate the language processes, read the diversity of the needs of the students and the different contexts in which they operate.

The teacher should also present language-based activities to help students develop reading techniques while leaving considerable space for the students' self-expression and encourage critical thinking.

Finally, I suggest taking into account the teacher's interest, as well, since it is very difficult to put across a liking for something you don't like.

Enjoy what you are teaching and your students will enjoy what they are learning.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude I would like to quote **Henry James (1913)**:

"To believe in a child is to believe in the future. Through their aspirations they will save the world. With their combined knowledge the turbulent seas of hate and injustice will be calmed. They will champion the causes of life's underdogs, forging a society without class discrimination. They will supply humanity with music and beauty, as it has never known. They will endure.

Towards these ends I pledge my life's work.
 I will supply the children with tools and knowledge to overcome the obstacles.
 I will pass on the wisdom of my years and temper it with patience.
 I shall impact in each child the desire to fulfill his or her dream.
 I shall teach”.

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