

# The Role of Literature in the Teaching of Foreign Languages <sup>1</sup>

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According to Richards and Rodgers (1986) modification in language teaching methods throughout history takes into account changes in learners necessities, the goals of language study, and theoretical advances. There has been a proliferation of approaches and methods in contemporary second or foreign language teaching which reflects the wish to find better ways of teaching languages. The early 1980s witnessed a revived interest in the role of literature and a great number of recent language teaching texts, particularly those which use a communicative approach, have included literature in their contents for language study. (Jackson and Di Pietro 1992, Smalzer and Lim 1994)

This article presents the results of research into the use of literature in the EFL/ESL classroom. We will try to justify the benefits of the literature-based approach in the teaching of foreign or second languages and to sketch some activities derived from it. Included are some extracts taken from students' actual performance. Literature offers contextual, linguistic, cultural and methodological advantages in the teaching of second or foreign languages. All these benefits together lead to a communicative and motivational EFL/ESL teaching-learning process. In the following paragraphs, we will try to support each one of these benefits.

The first advantage that has been mentioned here is the fact that literature offers a context that promotes meaningful learning. When we speak about meaningful learning—learning that is real, important and interesting to students—unavoidable is mention of Ausubel (1983) and Novak (1988). They see the process of acquiring knowledge as accumulative. They state that what is going to be learned must be related to what students know. In other words, it must be related to any relevant aspect which pre-exists in the students' cognitive structure. In meaningful learning, the process of acquiring new information produces changes not only in the existing information

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(thesis) but in the new information as well. This supposes an interaction between pre-existing and new information (anthesis) and the result of this is learning (synthesis).

In contrast to learning by heart or senseless repetition, meaningful learning material is potentially related to the learners' cognitive baggage; that is to say, it can be included in the existing cognitive structure. Yet also, as the definition of meaningful learning implies, it is not only what is related to students' experience but also what is interesting to them which will be learned easily in an stimulating way. Meaningful learning leads to motivating, communicative and personal-responding classes.

Specifically speaking about the EFL/ESL field, Sorani and Tamponi (1992) recommend that the teaching of a second or foreign language should consist of meaningful contexts, especially those interesting to students according to their experience, knowledge of the world and interests. They also claim that the teaching of a second or foreign language should not be an isolated activity but an activity related to what students have to learn or have learned in other courses or in life to make them grow up as exceptional human beings.

When there is a good selection, literature is a rich source of meaningful context. A meaningful context is linked to the motivational aspect of literature, since it permits learners to read non-trivial material which makes them think about their own experience and give a personal response, and in that way its use is justified (Duff and Maley 1990). The use of literature in the EFL/ESL classroom is recommended, since it generates purposeful lessons and provides the basis for highly motivated small-group work (Enright and McCloskey, 1985).

The importance of literature has been stressed because literary texts are seen as potential material which provides the basis for interactive, meaningful and content-based ESL/EFL classes. In addition, literature serves as a stimulus for writing compositions. (Povey 1979; Widdowson 1983, and Spack 1985). Frequently in foreign or second languages teaching mundane topics are used and justified, but when there is a need of some change, literature can serve that purpose. Widdowson (1983) establishes the significance of an interesting context when he explains what happens in a classroom when trivial situations or mundane tasks are presented:

..Its not easy to see how learners at any level can get interested in and therefore motivated by a dialogue about buying stamps at a post office. There is no plot, there is no mystery, there are no characters; everything proceeds as if communication never creates a problem. There is no misunderstanding and there is no possibility of any kind of interaction.(Widdowson, p. 98).

Such a dialogue cannot produce any important effect in learners and of course it does not foster a desire to work with classmates in a motivating way. A text of this kind would supply a relevant point for learners, (but when they have to communicate really, they have nothing interesting to say). A trivial situation can offer students the opportunity to use the foreign language but only in a vacuum. But literary texts offer teachers and learners opportunities for escaping from everyday routine.

Hill (1989) also claims that literature offers a genuine context for communication because a story or a poem is easier to remember than a collection of unrelated items (rote learning). He points out that people analyze incoming messages in two ways: They have information connected with certain collections of sounds and symbols stored in their memory, and they have their own knowledge of the world and the context of the message from which to work (meaningful learning). When the teaching of language consists of using isolated sentences to illustrate particular points, it prevents the learners from making any analysis on the basis of context. In this way, they are unable to participate in the meaning. Not only foreign students but native speakers have difficulty remembering unrelated words and structures. If they do not have a meaningful context from which to work and to which they can relate what they learn, their communication and competence will be reduced: literary texts provide relevant materials, and necessary stimuli incite learners to speak and share ideas. In the case of a poem, there is little room for rote learning. Students do not have to learn it by heart but rather to extract the topic that it presents. Since, generally speaking, poetry discusses issues that are important to all human beings, students will have an interesting topic to talk about, and they will be involved not only intellectually but emotionally.

Literature is a non-trivial authentic material. It is non-trivial because it says something about fundamental human aspects, and it is authentic in the sense that it was not created as a classroom aid to teach a language. On the contrary it is genuine language as it is exposed to native speakers. Literature can be complementary to other authentic materials, such as advertisements, newspapers, city plans, travel timetables, forms, comics, and so

forth. (Brooks 1989, Dicker 1989, Hussein 1989, Ahellal 1990, and Ibsen 1990).

Literature offers cultural benefits. In the study of a foreign or second language, it is important to have some knowledge about the culture of that target language, so some time must be devoted to this task. Literature can be a complementary material to other ways of knowing the foreign culture such as films, radio or TV programs, magazines, newspapers, and music.

Literature gives learners the opportunity to get an understanding of the cultural values of English-speaking people, and make them see not only the differences that separate their own culture from the target one, or one target culture from another target culture but the similarities between both cultures and their own culture. About this topic, Bastrkmen (1990) states that: "...literature opens up to the learners the culture of the people whose language is being studied..." (p.18).

Literature gives linguistic advantages. The linguistic justification of the use of literature refers to literary texts as language. Pieces of literature "offer a genuine sample of a very large range of styles, registers and text-types at many levels of difficulty." (Duff and Maley 1990, p.6). For Littlewood (1986) literature offers opportunities to use language structures in reading comprehension if accompanied by grammatical analysis and explanations. Drills and exercises can provide students with needed linguistic structures. Literature may also help students expand the second language. This author also refers to literature as a vehicle for the learning of language varieties (formal and informal English, slang, etc.), and ranges of styles such as a poetic style, a conversational style for dialogues, and informative style for narrative. He also thinks that the work of a writer can lead readers to know local dialects, and illuminate the state of linguistic development. For McKay (1989) literature is also an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for differentiating use from usage (usage involves knowledge of linguistic rules, and use means knowing how to use these rules for effective communication).

What has been discussed so far is how literature can be beneficial in the EFL/ESL classroom, and it is necessary to stress the fact that all these benefits lead toward what Ibsen (1990) has called a creative methodology and what Duff and Maley (1990) consider is the methodological justification of the incorporation of literature in the foreign or second language teaching. When the students become personally involved with the literary

texts studied, such an involvement gives them the chance to be exposed to other viewpoints (the author's and their classmates' points of view) express their own ideas and feelings and at the same time get new and motivating classroom experiences, such as re-creating literary texts or even creating their own texts.

The aim of using literature in the EFL/ESL context should be to provide students with suitable lessons, but, as was mentioned earlier, in order to be successful, educators have to devote enough time and thought to selecting texts and methods. Specifically speaking about selection of texts, it is important to state that sometimes experimental literary works are not advisable in the EFL/ESL context due to the fact that some of these works remain obscure even for native speakers. The point related to methods is also very important, because the success of a class frequently depends on how to deal with the text in the classroom. The following part of this article concerns these topics.

### **Selection of texts and teaching methods**

Littlewood (1986) recommends to teachers that they should be clear about what literature offers and what students require to discuss its role and select appropriate methods and texts. The factor of student interest is so important that it should be taken into account by the teacher when s/he is selecting literary texts for her or his classes. Dellinger (1989) thinks that educators need to select interesting and motivating texts for his or her students. Undoubtedly, that will stimulate students to relate what they read with their own experience or their classmates experience. The literary texts to be read should be adapted to students' interest, age and experience. If professors select a difficult and inadequate text considering his or her students' linguistic experience and prior knowledge, this text can remain obscure.

Regarding selection, it is important to comment on what Ollmann (1993) found after designing two questionnaires and presenting them to his students in order to discover what strategies they use to choose books and whether they are making successful choices. This researchers conclusion provides a basis for thinking that when students speak out, they give teachers very good ideas for making good choices for their classes.

According to Mckay (1986), success in using literature depends not only upon the text linguistic level but upon its cultural level as well. We have to take into account that if it is an extremely difficult text, on a linguistics-

tic or cultural level it will probably bring few benefits. Neither would it be a good idea to use a simplified version of the text. One solution is to select texts which are relatively easy to read. Another important aspect to take into account is how to deal with the selection in the classroom. The text must be stimulating and the students must be taken into account.

Considering that sometimes it is hard to select appropriate literary texts, it seems necessary to include Bastrkmens (1990) guidelines for selection:

1. Choose texts with universal topics and themes so that students can have had personal experience of their own. This will facilitate classroom interaction.
2. Select works in an everyday setting and avoid abstract or fantasy-type literary pieces. In this way interaction will be easier and the vocabulary familiar.
3. It is better to work with contemporary texts, so that students will not have problems trying to understand archaic language.
4. Choose authors who use a simple style such as Hemingway, Frost and so forth.
5. Prefer works whose characters or themes are related to student age and interests.

### **Dealing with the text in the classroom**

For Mackay (1986) selection is only one step. The following one shows how to use the text in the classroom. She differentiates between efferent and aesthetic reading. Following Rosenblatt's tradition (1978), she defines efferent reading "as reading in which the reader is concerned with what he will carry away from the text" (p.195). Or in other words, the usefulness of it. In aesthetic reading "the readers primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading"(p.158). Or as Rosenblatt herself points out: "in aesthetic reading, the readers' attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with the particular text" (p. 25).

Mackay concludes by saying that classroom approaches to efferent and aesthetic reading must be different. In this sense, the text can be used to get to know the author's ideas, and how the language he is using functions. But it is also necessary to have students think in advance about the possibilities that they can find in the text, and to take into consideration their own experience in order to approach the text.

In what follows, a selection of activities from published sources are summarized, and some new activities are suggested.

## Activities

### *Pre-Reading Activities.*

*Skills involved:* writing and speaking.

*Level:* high intermediate or advanced learners

*Objectives:*

#### 1. Contextual benefits:

*To activate previous knowledge (aesthetic reading or reading which takes into account interaction between reader and text)*

*To make students reflect before they read (aesthetic reading)*

*To have students create meaning in advance*

*To avoid misunderstanding of the text to be read.*

#### 2. Linguistic benefit:

*To attack difficult words.*

The learners background knowledge with respect to the topic the reading selection discusses is crucial in text comprehension. Writing and discussion are not necessary follow-up activities; they can be carried out before reading the literary texts. Knutson (1997) points out that discussion and writing tasks can elicit students personal views or previous readings on a topic, or other expectations regarding a text content. Prior to reading, students can articulate their expectations as to what aspects will be illuminated and what perspective the text will reflect. Discussion before reading provides focus, which creates interest in the text. As preparation, the teacher may ask a question and have students debate it. Each student writes a short composition which represents his or her point of view. Afterwards, students compare their written productions and discuss the various compositions orally in order to obtain a focal point of reading that will follow.

Another pre-reading activity can be providing students with the title of the text to be read and or some key words which summarize the main idea of the literary work. When presenting the poem that the American writer Maya Angelou wrote and read in the inauguration of president Clinton “In the Pulse of the Morning”, the author of this work decided to ask students what the title and some key words suggested to them before giving them the poem. Some students said that the poem would be about a “new beginning”, “another opportunity”, “union among different people”, “sun-rising”, “hope”, “learning from mistakes”, and so forth. After having access

to the text, students felt that their predictions were close to what the poet tried to express. Additionally, they realized that there were more ideas that could be developed when they actually read the literary piece.

At the beginning level, previewing is very useful in order to make students guess meanings of unfamiliar words. If the teacher knows that students will meet some difficult words, s/he should work with those words in advance. In that case students will not have any vocabulary problems when reading the text. For instance, giving them an exercise sheet where they have to match words from the text with their corresponding synonym using an English-English dictionary is an advisable pre-reading activity.

### ***Reading/Discussing Activities***

*Skills involved:* all

*Objectives:*

1. Contextual benefits:

*To introduce literary texts in class*

*To have students interact with their classmates sharing their points of view.*

2. Linguistic benefit:

*To have students exposed to silent and oral English*

Smith and Johnson (1994) propose the following six basic activities for implementing literature in content studies:

- *Paired reading and discussions.* Two students of different reading levels read, question, review and share insights to assist one another.
- *Kaleidoscope reading.* Students read different portions of a text and share with the group what they have read.
- *Taping the text.* The teacher provides an audio copy of a text for the students to listen to as they read. (The author of this work taped the poem “In the Pulse of the Morning” to her class read by its own author due to the fact that *English Teaching Forum* gave its readers the disc as a present in the July 1995 issue.)
- *Guided reading.* The teacher reads some passages of the reading selection and gives students the opportunity to talk, silently read and think their way through the text.
- *Literary circles.* Students read and discuss a passage of a literary text in small groups.



- *Large group discussion.* The total learning community exchanges ideas, insights, questions and answers.

### ***Reading, writing and speaking***

*Level:* High intermediate or advanced learners.

*Objectives:*

1. Contextual benefits:

*To have learners involved in the literary text.*

2. Linguistic aspects:

*To write letters.*

*To have students exposed to an informal register*

3. Cultural benefits:

*To have students exposed to a different culture.*

The epistolary *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker can be used to fulfil the three objectives. After having discussed the novel in class, as a follow-up creative activity, students can write a letter to the main character of the narrative, telling her what they feel and think about her situation and even advising her what to do. In this way the students will be involved in the literary world presented and at the same time they will produce written language. The author of this article asked her students to write a letter to Celie, the main character of the novel who usually writes letter to God. The most surprising letter was the following one :

Dear Celie:

I have received and read all your letters but I hadn't had time to reply to them. I have been very busy trying to solve all my children's problems. Finally, this is your turn. I know that your life has been very difficult. Please, take your problems as they are just as high walls that you have to climb. I am sure that you are able to overcome difficult times. If you feel weak, then think of your dear sister who had found her way. She has discovered that to serve others makes sense. Try to search for a reason to live and you will see that things will be better.

Sincerely,  
God

Additionally, *The Color Purple* has good examples of informal English, or Black American English to be more specific. In this way students will be exposed to these registers and learn when and by whom they are used. As an exercise, students can be asked to find out the standard English equivalent of the black American English expression. Black American Culture seems to be different from other cultures, since it has its own features, but in spite of its differences, there will always be similarities among cultures. For instance, in many countries of Latin America there is a mix.

However, there are places within some of these countries where only people with African ancestors live. In this specific case, it would be interesting for students to compare African community of their country with that of African American people.

***Activities with stories.***

*Skills involved:* all

*Level:* Initial intermediate

*Activity:* Reconstructing the story (Adapted from Harwood 1990).

*Objectives:*

1. Linguistic aspect:

*To practice the four skills of language*

2. Contextual aspect:

*To have students think about the differences between quality and quantity.*

*Preparation:* the teacher selects a short story that students do not know.

The one selected for this activity is the following Aesop's fable:

A female fox treated with scorn a lioness because she never bore more than one young lion. Only one, the lioness replied, but a lion.

Fables are short, simple stories with animals as characters designed to teach a moral truth. They really refer to human beings and say something about human issues whose relevance endures with the passing of years.

This Aesop's fable is so short that students may take it for granted, so it would be useful if the teacher explores what the students think about the topic. It is a good idea to have the students think of what they consider more important: quality or quantity. The teacher will connect the fable with students' life if s/he asks them whether they prefer to have a lot of not really friends or only one good and honest friend. After this discussion, four groups will be formed. Each group will have a storyteller. The teacher must give each storyteller a copy of the fable. He or she must remove the storytellers to part of the room where the other students cannot read the story. The storytellers have to re-create the story using their own words, and add whatever they want but without changing the main idea of the fable. The storyteller tells his or her group the fable. In each group, the students try to create a new version of the story by adding new elements. At the end a member of each group (not the storyteller) tells the final version to his or her group and each version must be compared with the original version that was told to the storytellers.

The following version was created by students of the author of this article when she put the activity into practice in her class:

The lion said: "You should be disappointed because you can bear only foxes. I have a lion but a lion is the king of the jungle." Then, the fox replied, "Well, in spite of the fact that you are the king of the jungle, it is more important to be intelligent than to be big. See this: if a hunter wants to kill me it is easier for me to hide." The lion answered without showing any emotion: "Perhaps you are right but if I am hungry I can eat you." Immediately the lion ate the fox.

**Activity : A story in jumble questions ( Adapted from Misra and Sylvester 1990).**

*Level:* initial intermediate

*Skills Involved:* all

*Objectives:*

1. Contextual aspect:

*To have students recreate a story from some questions given by the teacher.*

2. Linguistic aspect:

*To practice the four language skills.*

*Preparation:* select a story and put it in questions.

Give students the story in questions. Afterwards, ask them to write a story from the questions individually, and compare their versions in pairs. The teacher may ask some students to read their versions. The whole activity must be completed in more or less thirty minutes. At the end, the teacher may give students the original version of the story so that they can compare it with their own version.

The author of this work gave her students some questions based on a story taken from oral tradition. This is the story:

That morning everybody woke up with sugar on their lips. Unfortunately, only a few people realized of what was happening: Those who kissed each other when they woke up.

It is important to stress that the students do not read the story. They only read the following questions:

1. What happened that morning?
2. Did people wake up with sugar on their lips?
3. Did every body realize of that?
4. Who realize of what had happened?
5. What did the people who realized of the situation do?

These are two versions of the story based on the questions:

That morning I woke up quietly. He continued to sleep. When I realized that his lips had a strange brightness. I approached him. I noticed that there was some sugar on his lips. I began to kiss him. His mouth was so sweet! I was enchanted. He woke up and we continued to kiss each other” I said to myself: What a sweet day!

--Natalia

That morning something had happened. Only a few people noticed. Everybody was very kind. Every body said good morning with a smile. Since that morning no one was angry. People from other towns said: It seems that these people have sugar on their lips. From their mouths only sweet words go out.

--Erika

### ***Involving students with poetry (Adapted from Reimel 1992)***

#### *Objectives:*

#### 1. Contextual Aspect:

*To involve students with poetry*

*To motivate them to read poetry*

Ask students to bring markers, old magazines, white sheets or cardboard, crayons scissors, glue, cloth ,etc. to class. In class give each student a different poem to read. After reading the poem ask them to produce a plastic response, for instance to make a collage or a drawing with their perceptions of the poem. Once they have created their collage or drawing, have them read the poem to their classmates and show to them their plastic work while explaining the relationship of its different elements with the poem itself.

After reading the poem “This is just to say” by William Carlos Williams, a student made a collage expressing her perceptions about the literary piece. Afterwards, she wrote some of her perceptions:

“This is a childish poem. The fact of being so honest and innocent at the same time is what is being transmitted here. A child doesn’t understand the meaning of private property and might think it is normal to take what is not his. There is also a naive way of expressing apology: “forgive me they were so delicious”. There is guilt for taking what doesn’t belong to him but there is also innocence because he is a child. That is why the collage has some fruit and lots of children, who are the symbol of innocence and happiness. All of us some time in our lives did such actions without wanting to cause any harm.. The honesty that the poem invites is implicit, but there is a testimony of some illegal action that has taken place.

--Yolanda Serafimov

**Short story writing****Objectives:**

## 1.Contextual Aspects:

*To use their imagination to create a story.*

## 2.Linguistic Aspect:

*To produce written language.*

At the end of the term, when students has been sufficiently exposed to literary texts, especially short stories, educators can motivate them to create their own story. This can be a final task since it synthesizes what has been experienced in class.

The following is a story written by a student after being exposed for a trimester to short stories.

I used to talk with him. I spent hours of my short life, talking with him, trying to make him understand my little world. I have to recognize that he knew everything about me. I didn't have to make a big effort to be understood by him. He could predict everything related to me. I was transparent to him.

I was working very hard because I had too much work at the university. In addition, I was worried about my new relationship. I met a boy and I was convinced that he was an excellent prospect, but nobody liked him. Appearance was very important to my family and also to him. I was confused and I couldn't find a good solution to my problem. I mean, to their problem because for me it wasn't a problem. I only wanted to enjoy it. You know... life is short and you should take advantage of it and enjoy it, don't you think?

He was very sad... I didn't want to talk to him because I was ashamed. I didn't find out how to express my feelings. He ignored me and I also tried to ignore him. But I couldn't stand that situation. He was my only friend, the best one. He was my best friend, the only one.

I went to bed late at night. Probably it was five or six o'clock in the morning. I was tired, but it was a common situation during the class period. Mom woke me up early in the morning because I had to go to class. I saw him this morning for the last time...He kissed me and said that we had to talk. I asked him to give me a ride to the university... and like everyday he did it. He never said: "No, I cant". He was disposed to help me everyday. I couldn't speak to him, I really wanted to but I was tired...I would never imagine that was our last morning together. I went to class and he went to his job. I came back home early in the afternoon. I took the bus and I arrived one hour later. I only wanted to sleep. I felt very happy because we broke the ice and I thought that this was the first step to find a solution and not to fight anymore, but it wasn't...well, it wasn't enough... I tell you everything you can read here not because I want you to feel sorry about me but because I think that you are on time, your chance is now, not tomorrow, your opportunity is this one not another.

My sister got me up at eleven o'clock at night and she told me that he hadn't arrived yet. I was sleepy and I couldn't understand what she was talking about.

Everybody began to call us. They didn't want to say anything, no explanations, just diffuse words, just confused words, no more words, just silence... I realized what happened, he was dead. My only friend, my best friend was dead.

I used to talk with him. He knew everything about me and he knows more than everything. I didn't have to make a big effort to be understood by him and I don't need to make any effort, at present. He was my father. I was transparent to him, but now...he is transparent to me.

--Raiza C. Pietri

The activities above are very useful in an integrated class of English as a foreign or second language. The students will be listening and speaking without neglecting the two remaining skills; reading and writing. On the one hand, students will be exposed to literature and will have the chance of being creative and using their imagination. In this way, they will not see literature from afar. Literature will appear as something that they themselves can enrich and even create with their own experience.

As can be seen, the students will be engaged interactively with the text and with their classmates in the performance of tasks involving literary texts. In order to complete the tasks, students will have to pay close attention to the texts. This will generate silent and oral language. In the process, students will be active agents, and there will be real interaction between the learners and the texts and between the learners and their classmates.

In the class work and discussions, any response will be welcome. The teacher must move around the room monitoring each group, and encouraging students to participate. The students will be the center of the learning experience while the teacher will be relegated to the role of facilitator.

The students' seats should be arranged in a circle or semi-circle which is best to the needs of communicative activities. The first part of a one-hour class period will be devoted to the work of four or more groups depending on class size. The second portion of the hour of class will be a whole group activity, so students will form a circle. This arrangement will create the best conditions for listening and speaking.

## Conclusions

Since literature provides exposure to universal human experience and relevant topics whose importance survives with the passing of years, students can be involved in the texts and give personal responses while practicing the four skills, as well as improving their performance in the foreign or

second language. Literature also gives learners interesting and stimulating material which enhances and deepens their knowledge about the target culture. Additionally, literature can give students chances to use the foreign language in a creative way.

In order to have really successful lessons, it is necessary for the teacher to select the literary texts according to his or her students' age, linguistic knowledge and interests, and devote time and thought to considering how the text will be used in the classroom.

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