

**AN APPROACH TO TEACHING LITERATURE TO EFL  
LEARNERS / UNE APPROCHE POUR ENSEIGNER LA  
LITTÉRATURE EN CLASSE DE FLE<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** *Our paper is to explore a possible framework that can be used by teachers to lead students to an awareness of how the literary text codifies its meanings and make them react to its themes and representations of human experience. Modern critics have explored several myths concerning the study of literature. Language teachers are likely to perpetuate the same myths about literature that were transmitted via their own education. However, it is the reader's freedom to interpret a text according to his/her own outlook and beliefs, which makes the study of literature such a liberating experience. Some awareness of the culture of English-speaking countries is indispensable to understanding and evaluating literature written in English. The student has to learn something of the history, customs, and way of life within which these works were written. The teacher's ultimate aim is to provide students with the attitude and abilities relevant to the reading of literary texts. As regards the participation in a discussion of the work, the teacher has to make sure that the communication between him and his students is not one-way. He has to give up the traditional way of regarding students as empty 'containers' to be filled by the knowledge imparted by an omniscient teacher. A course text must therefore be accessible in more than simple language terms. Students have to appreciate and respond to the text's significances. The categories for text analysis should deal with the text in a way which ensures that the fundamental issues will not be neglected. Besides, the examination of the different levels by which the text communicates its meanings should help students to develop their powers to interpret independently other literary texts.*

**Key-words:** *literary awareness, communicative skills, comprehension, literary experience, text analysis.*

Literature is language in use yet it involves language and something more: meanings go beyond language, and the appreciation and enjoyment of literature require the development of more than linguistic capacities. A basic understanding of language of literary texts is essential, but not sufficient to comprehend their significance.

The primary concern of a teacher of English who teaches literature is to concentrate on the literary texts themselves, clarifying their meaning and assisting students to perceive the precision and vitality of the language the author has employed. The assumption underlying this approach is that as literature provides the student with an abundance of examples of the subtle and complex uses of the grammar and vocabulary of English, the student develops his/her language skills and improves an overall proficiency in it through reading literature. Therefore, literature can be used effectively to produce language consciousness.

It is a well-known fact that one finds English used as its idiomatic best and most productively in literature and great exposure to literature can compensate for the deficiencies of the linguistic approach in the areas of grammar, idiom, vocabulary, and syntax and can enhance the students' competence in English. It is only through continued contact with writing aimed at native speakers that non-native students can acquire the connotations of the words used.

Anyway, literature is only one of the sources of promoting language learning, and, if we want a literature course to be quite beneficial, it should be conducted in such a way that it should serve to develop both literary awareness and language competence.

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### **1.A Look at Teaching Literature: Myths and New Ideas**

Lately there has been an upsurge of interest in the use of literature in EFL classrooms. Many writers stress the benefits of using the literary texts as the basis for imaginative interactive and discussion activities. Simpson (1996) stressed the value of drama and role-play activities in developing not only students' oral language skills, but also their imaginative sensibilities, so they will be receptive to a literary text and be able to make a personal response to it.

The essence of any literary experience must be an examination of how the text provokes an inter-subjective experience that generates readings and interpretations. A genuine program for the study of literature needs to go beyond only providing a range of communicative and drama-based activities. A feasible framework for structuring analysis and discussion of the text itself needs to be worked out. Students have to be guided towards an appreciation of the processes whereby a literary text generates meanings and elicits a response from the reader.

Besides, teachers experienced in using literature in their classes need to be exposed to ideas that reflect modern literary and semiotic approaches. On the other hand, teachers who have had little or no experience in dealing with literature need themselves a lot of guidance. They need to be shown the pedagogic implications of current thinking on the status of literary texts and the interaction between the reader and the writer to which they give rise. So, we need to explore a possible framework that can be used by teachers to lead students to an awareness of how the literary text codifies its meanings and challenges the reader to react to its themes and representations of human experience.

Modern critics have explored several myths concerning the study of literature. Language teachers, unless they are provided with a framework on which to rely their pedagogic treatment of the literary experience, are likely to perpetuate the same myths about literature that were transmitted via their own education. One of these myths is the reverence due certain texts because of their status as "classics". As Barthes (1984) pointed out, the reputation of these classic works consists in their unquestionable value, as if the fictional world of the text is an insight into the human condition which has indubitable moral value for all readers in all ages and cultures.

Influential critics like Barthes and Derrida (1988) have challenged the authority of the classic texts. Their approach to literary texts is based on the idea that each reader has the freedom to evaluate the coherence of the writer's work and interpret it according to his or her own experience and attitude to the world. It is always possible that a number of readers will agree that a text relates to their interests, or presents some aspects of the human condition in a compelling manner. In a very real sense, the meaning of a literary work lies in each individual's reading of it. We do not approach a text empty-handed, but bring to it our own emotional baggage. A text is sure to elicit a plurality of responses, and it is this difference in individuals' responses that makes the study of literature such a worthy basis for interaction that will result in a development of students' language skills.

Another myth regarding the study of literature is that the quality of a literary text is directly linked with the degree to which that text reflects reality and gives the reader insights into its workings. The most valuable texts are, according to this view, those that give the reader a natural representation of life and human relationships. Critical trends have pointed out the difficulties with using criteria of this concept as a basis for approaching literary texts. The fictive world of a literary text cannot be granted any absolute status as the representation of our human world, since the writer is a product of a particular society and culture. The writer is himself or herself a product of a specific environment and of society. His or her writing reflects these decisive influences, no matter how perceptively the human condition is presented in the text. Some readers

agree that a particular text is “realistic” because the author articulates through it in their attitudes, obsessions and prejudices. In other words, certain works may have been considered “classics” because they present the world through the eyes of their privileged group of readers. It is obvious, therefore, that literary texts must be accessible to students so that they can respond to them in the light of their own cultural experience.

The third myth, which is the most widespread, is that the meaning of a literary text can best be discovered by relating it to the writer’s own life. Nowadays, attempts to make a direct connection between the fictional world of the text and the autobiographical details of the writer are seen as simplistic and betraying an ignorance of the dynamics of the writer – reader relationship. Modern critics are more concerned with the themes and desires that inhabit the text. These need not always be a product of the writer’s conscious intentions.

Another myth many teachers may have picked up via their own education is that studying the right kind of literature is of moral value to students. But if we attach some guaranteed moral value to reading certain literary works, we can misinterpret the literary experience. Individual readers react very differently to the same text. There is a possibility that students might react negatively to works that others find exciting. Any claims as to the moral value of literature must therefore be viewed with suspicion, since they represent a threat to the freedom of the individual reader in the literary reading process.

It is the reader’s freedom to interpret a text according to his/her own outlook, beliefs, and experiences that makes the study of literature such a liberating experience. In order to sustain a course there is a need for some concrete content that can stimulate communication in the classroom. A literary text can satisfy this need by raising themes and issues that are of real interest in the language-learning game.

## **2.How to Choose Texts**

A literature course can be offered only to students at a certain level of language or reading comprehension. The subtleties, the implications, and ambiguities that enable the reader to interpret the literary work in a variety of ways, will be lost upon the student if his/her language competence is inadequate.

The more closely students attend to the language of a text, the more confidently they will be able to perceive its meanings, but concentration on language alone will mean that students will not go beyond understanding the utterances in the text. They will not be able to enjoy a literary text in relation to their own understanding of themselves and of the world, as many other factors contribute to the comprehension, appreciation, and evaluation of a literary text.

The cognitive development of the student must be taken into account in the choice of texts if the student is to comprehend the significance of and respond sensitively to what he/ she is asked to read. We must remember that the intellectual demands made on the student vary according to the writer. Although a teacher would not encounter much difficulty in teaching to non-native students most of Dickens’ novels, a Henry James or James Joyce novel would require endless explanations. Even then, most students would have only a vague idea of what the story was about. All the aesthetic pleasure a reader naturally derives from a literary text would disappear. Since the students would not be able to relate to themselves the experiences and emotions evoked in the text, they would not be inclined to participate in any discussion the teacher might initiate.

Literature is the product of a particular culture and is more culture-bound than language. Therefore, some awareness of the culture of English-speaking countries is indispensable to understanding and evaluating literature written in English. The student has to learn something of the history, customs, and way of life within which these works

were written. External evidence is often helpful in interpreting and evaluating a work. Information about the writer's world view, attitudes, beliefs can be of great assistance to students.

The students should know how to recognize the special conventions that operate in literary works. One can concentrate on the literariness of a text – plot, characterization, value, motivation, etc. – if students are competent in the language and familiar with the literary conventions. Although most of the genres, conventions, and devices used in literature seem common across cultures, there may be modifications, and the teacher should draw attention to them.

Even if all these considerations are taken into account in choosing texts, students' dislike of a text – either because the language is too difficult or because cultural references are inaccessible or because they misunderstand the conventions being used – cannot be avoided. If the students' ideas, experiences, needs, beliefs and world view are completely at variance with what they are asked to read and evaluate, it is useless to expect them to be motivated by or interested in the assigned text.

### **3.The Teacher's Role**

The literary text, if chosen with the above criteria in mind, enables the student to look at the world in new ways and to find significance in things that before appeared commonplace, because the writer, by using his/ her imagination, creates a special kind of reality and uses language in a special way. That is the reason why it is often impossible to express the message that literary language conveys in any other way. Even when a literary text is about objectively real people and places, the writer treats them in an imaginative way, and he makes use of the language so as to create the desired illusion.

The chosen form of presentation, or genre, also influences the lexical and syntactic features of the work. The notion of a kind of language in English suitable or unsuitable for literature has seldom existed. The literary writer uses familiar features in an unusual way in order to convey his/ her imaginary creation: for instance, sometimes effective emphasis is obtained simply by repeating a word or phrase until it acquires a special significance. The symbolic and ironical uses of the language often go unnoticed if the teacher does not draw the students' attention to them – the symbolic, because the surface meaning is easily understood and the student often fails to look beyond it, and the ironical, because the student accepts the surface meaning instead of rejecting it in favor of a contrary meaning.

It is the teacher's role to provide information about the writer's attitude toward his/her work and about the conventions underlying the work. Students need guidance even with contemporary works of literature. For example, the device called "stream of consciousness", which is used for verbalizing thought being a manifestation of the psychological interest in the unconscious, it is difficult for a student unfamiliar with the device to grasp.

Language is a living thing that grows and changes. New words are constantly being added, while others drop out of the language or take on new meanings. Changes in the meanings of words can lead to a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of a literary work.

The teacher's ultimate aim is not to teach specific books but to provide students with the attitudes and abilities relevant to the reading of literary texts. Once the student has acquired the means of entering the writer's imagined world, the universality of the themes, the significance of the experiences recounted, and the relevance to the student's own life of the ideas, events, and emotions dealt with in the work will inevitably arouse his interest and motivate him. To maintain this interest and to have students participate in a discussion of the work, the teacher has to make sure that the communication

between him and his students is not one-way. He has to give up the traditional way of regarding students as empty 'containers' to be filled by the knowledge imparted by an omniscient teacher. The teacher's function is to guide and assist students, not to bombard them with information.

The most evident differences between a literary and a non-literary text are the suggestive power and ambiguity of the former. These serve as stimuli for discussion, in which students are encouraged to come up with a variety of interpretations and thus become actively engaged with the text. In order to develop literary awareness, the teacher should guide students in generalizing from the given text, in exploring relationships between literary texts and everyday life and between types of literary texts.

#### **4.A Few Practical Considerations**

The actual choice of text is clearly of crucial importance to the success of any attempt to introduce literature into a language course. Several considerations must determine this choice of texts. We find it proper to select prose texts, though they are obviously relevant to poetry, too. In general, prose texts are more suited to the needs of EFL students, since they provide an extensive exposure to language in which stories and themes are more easily generated than in poetry. Poetry is often extremely elliptical as an artistic medium, and it achieves its effects, by deliberately deviating from normal use of the language system. It tends to require a sophisticated reader already familiar with its conventions.

Prose writers vary in the complexity of their use of language. The language features of Hemingway's prose are evidently less demanding for the language student than the writing of, say, Henry James, though this does not mean that Hemingway's themes are simpler than James'. It is very important that texts for courses should be within the range of students in straightforward language terms. It is also important to consider students' reading speed and reading habits, and to select a text that can be digested in the time available for the course. Perhaps short stories are ideal for students' first exposure to literature.

Modern prose texts that feature a lot of dialogue and contemporary forms of expression are likely to appeal strongly to students. A text that is going to be selected for a course must, however, be accessible in more than simple language terms. Students must be able to appreciate and respond to the text's coding of its cultural and emotional experience. Besides, it should have a story line and characters that engage students' interest. The themes of the text must also relate in some way to students' life experiences. These conditions are essential if literature is to fulfill its dual purpose: to provide stimulating course content and develop students' communicative abilities.

In many language-teaching situations, particularly outside Europe and North America, there are strong cultural pressures that affect the choice of texts. These pressures must be recognized and sensible choices made so that the literature course component is acceptable in all semesters. In some societies, texts that deal with certain aspects of human relationships or political themes might well prove to be problematic. Students and teachers should feel comfortable with a literary text. They should not feel that they are engaged in a study that is somehow improper or dangerous. If students are to effectively come to grips to a text, they must feel free to express their ideas and opinions. If the text is not appropriate to the students' age and/ or the cultural and educational environment, then it is bound to be counterproductive in language-building terms.

#### **5. Categories for Text Analysis**

In order to talk meaningfully about a literary text, it is necessary to organize activities according to a number of categories. These categories reflect our current

awareness of the relationship between the reader and the writer of imaginative texts, and the different levels at which a prose literary text operates (Jones 1993). A course that uses these categories as an organizing principle for its development of activities should be able to deal with the text in a serious way which ensures that the fundamental issues will not be neglected. At the same time, the examination of the different categories or levels by which the text communicates its meanings should help students to develop the powers to interpret independently other literary texts. Of course, the sophistication of course materials based on the categories will depend on the students' level of English and previous exposure to literature. Here are the categories:

1. Plot and Suspense
2. Characters and Relationships
3. Major Themes
4. Methods Writer Uses to Communicate His/ Her Attitudes
5. Reader's Response

These categories are not meant to lead the student towards an exhaustive knowledge of every aspect of literary experience. They rather represent a realistic basis for approaching texts. They ensure that the substance of any engagement with a text will be the basis for classroom activities.

- Plot and Suspense

The first concern must be to focus students' attention on the skeleton of the plot structure. Given that students will, to varying degrees, be faced with basic language-processing difficulties, it cannot be assumed that they will be able to follow and sequence the flow of events that make up the story. Also, by the time students grasp the basic plot structure, it is not possible to attempt any deeper level of text treatment.

At the initial stage of involvement with the text, it is also possible to alert students to the ways in which a good story quickly arouses their curiosity and creates suspense. Prediction activities can alert students to the way in which questions and expectations are aroused in the mind of the active reader. Such questions will also show students the line of interaction with the text that the role of the reader demands.

- Characters and Relationships

The second category for text treatment is the characters in the story. The aim is to encourage students to analyze the role of the different characters in the story. As an initial activity students could be asked to draw up a profile of the major characters. Later activities could be based on the students' differing personal reactions to the characters. Students should also be asked to consider the relationships between the major characters. One activity could be to represent these relationships diagrammatically. Carrying on from this, discussion activities could be centered on a closer examination of these relationships. It is always possible that the students will come up with different views on the characters' relations. This will be very valuable if the students can provide textual evidence to support their views, since this will allow a meaningful discussion to develop in the classroom.

- Major Themes

We can aim activities at identifying the central themes of the story and consideration of the importance that each individual reader will attach to them. One possible activity would be to give students a long inventory of possible themes and then ask them to select the prime themes of the text or to rank the themes in order of their relevance to the text. Students could also be asked to collect textual evidence for the importance of themes that they put forward or select from a teacher-provided list. Such activities will surely initiate a lot of discussion, since students with different personalities and backgrounds will come up with different ideas on what the story is really about. A plurality of response to a text is not only welcome in terms of current

thinking on the dynamics of literature, but also in terms of the conditions created for genuine communication.

- **Writer's Methods**

In this category of text analysis, the teacher and students seek to uncover the methods by which the writer communicates his/ her own attitudes towards the unfolding story. Metaphorical use of language is one of the literature's most effective ways of communicating thoughts and emotions.

Students need to be sensitized to the way in which a writer makes certain objects or events symbolic of a whole range of thinking or feeling that is build up throughout the text.

- **Reader's Response**

Although a writer has certain intentions regarding the way in which the discourse of a text will be understood by the reader, the possibility nevertheless exists that the individual reader will interpret the text in ways that do not correspond to the writer's intentions. Each reader has his own personal history, outlook on human experience, and field of interests.

A variety of interpretations of a text is preferable since it matches so ideally the agenda for learner-centered language development. The study of literature can provide the content basis that will foster genuine needs to communicate since a plurality of responses to any given text is the fundamental goal of a text analysis.

### **Conclusions**

A literature course can be interesting and motivating to the students if proper criteria for choosing and grading the texts are well-established. In grading the texts, not only lexical and syntactic factors but also the complexity of the external factors should be considered.

Most students find nineteenth-century English literature closer to their own experience and easier to understand as far as the language and mode of narration or presentation are concerned. Much contemporary literature does not appeal to the average student. Terms like 'existentialism', 'postmodernism', and 'symbolism' seem to puzzle him/ her. Neither the themes nor devices prevalent in modern works are easy to comprehend, appreciate, or evaluate without skillful guidance from the teacher.

We would like to stress that great attention should be paid to the choice of texts in order to ensure that the student's competence in English is appropriate, and the cultural references in the text are not inaccessible. Literary texts chosen with these criteria in mind and taught in such a way as to enhance both literary awareness and language competence can be of great help in promoting language learning.

The proposed categories presentation for text analysis has indicated pedagogic lines of approach for the use of literary texts in the EFL classroom. The approach sensitizes students to the levels on which a text works and emphasizes the degree to which the text draws the reader into an interactive experience. The personal commitment required of the student makes a literary text the ideal content basis for developing communicative skills.

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