

Teaching literature in the language classroom: an introduction

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The search for engaging and authentic content is a perennial problem for language teachers, particularly in an EFL setting. Well-chosen literature can offer not just motivating content but also the necessary context. This article provides an introduction to literature use in the language classroom, balancing the theoretical and the immediately practical. The article is comprised of three parts. Firstly, while noting particular characteristics claimed for 'literary language' (Hall, 2005; Pope, 2002), a 'literariness spectrum' (Carter and Nash, 1983) may be more helpful than a binary literary/not-literary. Secondly, the three models of language teaching (Carter and Long, 1991) - the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model - are described in detail, with the author suggesting a fourth model he deems appropriate for the EFL situation, that he calls 'the context model'. Lastly, the article provides a list of criteria to help teachers choose appropriate literature for their own language classrooms.

Within this first of three planned short overview articles, I offer a brief introduction to literature use in the language classroom. This should be useful for teachers considering using literature in the language classroom, while for those already doing so, it may refresh or challenge their thoughts on the matter by offering some differing perspectives. The article first considers the nature of literature and seeks to define the elusive. Secondly, three differing models of literature usage are presented, with an extra fourth model added, that is specifically relevant for EFL teaching. Finally, the article presents criteria teachers may consider in deciding upon choosing appropriate literature for their own classroom use.

What is literature?

Firstly, what is 'literature'? Is there something particular about 'literary language' perhaps, something to distinguish it from, well, 'non-literature'? Literary language may be variously considered more indirect and more 'elevated' (Hall, 2005, p9), with more creative sound structure, choice of words used, and word combinations (Pope, 2002). Carter and Nash (1983) however, advise avoiding a strict binary

literary/non-literary, instead proposing a spectrum of 'literariness'.

Perhaps literature is, to borrow from the indecency trial concerning the allegedly 'indecent' works of DH Lawrence, like pornography: literature is something that 'you know when you see it'. Defining pornography, or indeed 'sport' or 'game' (try it, it's fun: compare with Wittgenstein (1953) for the latter if you think you have done well) is problematic. It is likely that, in the absence of a single necessary condition, we 'cluster' in such situations, when "multiple conditions interact in such a way that no one of them is necessary" (Jackendoff, 2002, p352), meaning we simultaneously group conditions in our minds to signify a concept, but may lack a clear exemplar (as we may have for a dog, or a chair, for instance).

While this is sub-optimally non-specific, happily it does give us teachers a certain free rein to choose, based perhaps upon our varying 'clustering' notions and our differing learning objectives as curriculum planners and classroom teachers, informed by the respective model(s). For myself, literature is whatever work of prose or poetry accords with assisting

learners to achieve the level of understanding to meet designated course objectives and that, more directly, is of appropriate length and level, and more generally that I think students will benefit from engaging with ('benefit' as considered below considering the three differing models). I realize that other teachers may differ from me in the following regard, but my one rule is that the literature must be an English-language piece of work (here, in accord with the cultural model).

Indeed, looking at the articles and interviews again that members have submitted for our inaugural SIG publication there is considerable variety in members' approaches to literature and what is considered 'literature'. Some members are leaning toward the more canonical in their choices of prose and poetry, while other members view 'literature' as more flexible and inclusive, including song lyrics, movies and TV drama series.

Why use literature? Different models of teaching literature

There are a good many reasons for teachers to use literature in the language classroom. The likely benefits can be usefully considered in relation to Carter and Long's (1991) three models of why teachers use literature: *the cultural model*, *the language model*, and *the personal growth model*, plus a further suggested EFL-relevant model, *the context model*.

The cultural model

The cultural model views literature as a product, as an artifact. Prose and poetry (perhaps additionally more flexibly, songs, TV, movies as noted earlier) are studied and analysed as literary representations of the culture from which they derive. From this perspective, literature may be used as a means of attempting to understand the target culture, and as a prism through which to view events of the day. This is the traditional model, one that remains popular in many university courses, plus at A-level in the UK (as I hark back now to my French studies, remembering reading Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*....) A text may be examined as part of a movement and as one of successive items within a particular genre. Social

and historical background to the texts is considered and the text placed and analyzed within such an integrated context. In the EFL class, literature may thus be employed as an integral part of a cultural course, to aid intercultural understanding, or the cultural analysis may conversely be derived from the chosen text(s)

The language model

"Literature gives evidence of the widest variety of syntax, the richest variations of vocabulary discrimination. It provides examples of the language employed at its most effective, subtle and suggestive" (Povey, 1979, p162)

The focus of the language model is psycholinguistic, how language is actually used within the text, how language learners engage with and process the language. The text may be used to provide exemplars of particular grammatical points, vocabulary and/or lexical chunks. More ambitiously, teachers may ask students to engage in stylistic analysis of the text (see e.g. Paul Simpson's *Stylistics* for an overview), though this may be best reserved for advanced level students who are English majors. A practice still favoured by many university faculty in Japan, where grammar-translation appears to remain the prevailing methodological paradigm, is the view of language as object of study for cognitive coding rather than as means of communication.

Among the suggested benefits of the language model are: the expansion of vocabulary; increased reading fluency; enhanced interpretive and inferential skills due to dealing with texts of increased complexity and sophistication; exposure to greater variety of language and greater depth of language and intended meaning; increased motivation to continue plugging away to try to understand a more challenging text as it is argued that literature is more personal and more relevant, ultimately more memorable (Hall, 2005, p48) and that the language is ungraded, thus authentic (Widdowson, 1979).

The personal growth model

The personal growth model offers a more student-centred approach to literature study. With regard to perhaps the most commonly discussed area in the

L2 affective domain, motivation (see e.g. Dornyei, 2001), the study of literature is widely regarded as a high status activity, something that is intellectual and somehow 'important'. In addition, a sense of achievement is likely derived from successful reading of a non-graded authentic text.

Within this student-centred paradigm, suggested benefits of using literature thus focus on the affective. Teachers use literature more holistically as a vehicle to educate, to promote critical awareness, to have students assess, evaluate and discuss issues within the text and provoked by the text. While not wishing to become too embroiled in discussion as to value, content and changes of that deemed to be literary canon, it is likely uncontroversial to note that 'good' literature is likely to have been adjudged to be unusually worthy for some very good reasons, the staying power of greats across decades and centuries across many fleeting public and ivory tower fashions and whims, being due to uncommon depth and human universality. In my own experience as an L1 student, and in my experiences as an L2 literature teacher mainly using Orwell plus assorted Dystopian texts, well-chosen literature facilitates discussion of issues that students can, and do, really engage in with genuine gusto.

Students are encouraged to interact, to transact with (Rosenblatt, 1938) with literature and to engage personally with the material. Reading Response, developed by Rosenblatt, building on the constructivist writing of Dewey, is central within this paradigm, wherein students' personal responses are very much encouraged, most commonly via Reader Response protocol.

The context model

Particularly within the EFL setting, when students leave the language classroom and the L2 ceases, I suggest that a fourth model may be added, the context model. Where genuine opportunities for language use are so literally distant, it is understandable that students may struggle to see the point in their studies, leading to lack of motivation and diminishing engagement with something that is, again literally, so foreign. Such are the perils of using

ill-considered material that may be deemed irrelevant to students in the whimsically-monickered 'EFNOR' teaching context: English For No Obvious Reason.

To borrow from JRR Tolkien, who used the term to describe the creation of an entire, internally consistent literary 'world', using literature in the EFL classroom can provide this context that is so lacking. The literature is both the class *content* and the literature is the *context*.

Choosing literature: establishing criteria

The key element in determining the success or otherwise of literature use in the language classroom is the choice of literary work. If the language is too difficult, or the subject matter too culturally distant, benefits will be minimal (McKay, 1982). What are the possible solutions?

One possibility is to use abridged texts. Graded readers series commonly feature a number of classics abridged to differing levels, graded according to number of head words. Honeyfield (1977) laments however that information is diluted, the product is homogenized, and cohesion and readability reduced by such simplification of syntax and abridgment (p434-5). Certainly, I was left considerably deflated reading the Penguin level 4 (1700 head words) graded reader version of *1984*, as it just seemed... too empty. However, the level 6 (3000 head words) Penguin version of *Brave New World* was still an impressive text.

A second solution is to use graded readers written specifically for language students within headword limit ranges. Extensive Reading (ER) popularizes the use of student-chosen texts (both abridged and specifically written) in language programs, students being encouraged to read according to their own choices from a large choice, and to read lots. Applying Donelson and Nilsen's earlier observations, such stories tend to have a small cast of characters, often young adults, and be limited stylistically (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980, p14-15). When such stories are engaging and well-written, they may be suitable choices, but teachers need to be advised that while short, they do have such limitations of scope and may lack what we may call 'depth' or a common humanity

which teachers may be looking for when choosing to use 'literature' with their students.

Thirdly, teachers may choose to use literature 'as is', neither written for language students, nor specifically diluted. It is likely they would choose to do so out of concern for their readers: from a desire to provide their language students with authentic L1 materials to read. We teachers have all probably struggled with this issue. How to choose suitable texts? Indeed what comprises 'suitability'? What criteria can teachers employ when deciding upon texts for the forthcoming semester? Some useful criteria are provided below.

Genre

A fundamental choice is whether to use multiple extracts, short stories and / or poems in a course, or to focus on one or more lengthier texts. Benton and Fox pithily (appositely in context!) note the benefits of brevity: 'where the novel is intractable the short story is amenable' (p52). In using shorter extracts, teachers may consider connecting within an overriding theme or series of themes when submitting a course proposal.

Length

If the book is too long, students may simply be scared off. Assuming that students are not all returnees, then perhaps 100-150 pages may be a reasonable upper limit for university students.

Film availability

Students do appear to enjoy watching film versions of books. While this may partly be motivated by desire to avoid 'work' for a class period (!) viewing the film version is likely to support their understanding, particularly of lengthier narratives. Comparing the two versions can be a beneficial class activity, considering why the film may have chosen to omit, to amend, or to change the focus, or change the ending. This should only be tried after reading, as the film version is often different, sometimes very different (e.g. with both film versions of *Animal Farm* – notably the 1954 version, funded by the CIA, the deepest irony), plus it defeats the object of reading and creating minds' eye meaning with the language if

this is pre-created, pre-visualised. Of course watching the film can be assigned as homework to be discussed in class.

Balance between action and description

This of course does depend on how the teacher chooses to use the text, on students' majors and the language level of the students, but L2 readers may struggle upon being confronted with an excess of colourful description, no matter how beautifully the author describes, for example, the bleakness of the moors. Simply too much new low frequency vocabulary wedged together risks the student skipping chunks, and a lack of comprehension, resulting in likely concomitant falls in motivation. A suitable balance between description and action is thus something to bear in mind when choosing texts.

Sensitivity to religion, customs and traditions

Teachers are of course advised to be circumspect. The line between foolhardy and brave is notoriously thin and Tennyson had something to say of this regarding Cardigan in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. Choosing a 'challenging' novel about a subject of particular local sensitivity or discussing a recent controversial event may well be considered brave by the teacher, but teacher absence due to the onset of disciplinary proceedings does neither teacher nor student any favours. Here in Japan, drug use is a potentially contentious and inflammatory subject, so think carefully before, for example, deciding if it will be appropriate or not to include Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* on a reading list.

Relevance and interest to students

Don't be afraid to challenge students with more involved, serious topics, beyond the standard ESL/ EFL textbook fare: the usual topics of free time, holidays, friends. I have never seen EFL students so engaged as when we were working through *Animal Farm* in one course and then with dystopian movies, novels and short stories the following semester. Students were surprised, moved, and shocked by what they were reading. They were remarkably engaged in their studies - by reading well-written texts of uncommon profundity about *things that*

matter. Let's teach up rather than dumb down to students subjected to admiss, perpetual SMS and general short-termism, a 'culture of the disinherited' (Williams, cited in Benton and Fox, p63).

What do you like as a teacher?

Finally, if the teacher radiates boredom, it is unlikely that students will be enthused. So, teach what you like to read (assuming you like to read,

if not you likely wouldn't be reading this paper, and you probably shouldn't be considering using literature!), and you are likely to be more energetic and your enthusiasm for the text will communicate itself to students. 'Hey, *this* is really worth reading. This is great stuff. This matters. Reading this matters. Reading matters'.

And reading certainly does matter.

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