

Plenary presentation: The place of literature in the ELT curriculum

Donna Tatsuki & Lori Zenuk-Nishide

Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Graduate School for English Language Education and Research

For the past 20 years the focus in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been on “practical English” despite the fact that there has been no critical discussion or concrete rationale for the abandonment of literary texts/sources in English language programs—particularly in conjunction with the development of productive skills (speaking and writing) but also with respect to receptive skills (reading and listening). Furthermore, researchers with backgrounds in literature and linguistics have never before collaborated to seriously consider how literary texts may best be utilized in ELT.

During the 2011 academic year Donna Tatsuki had the privilege to take sabbatical and chose Europe (Rome) as her research home base. This offered her opportunities for classroom observations (Italy) and time to consult with teachers (Italy, Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, UK) about their use of literary texts in language teaching. This presentation reported on just a small part of the current collaboration amongst scholars in literature, linguistics and applied linguistics who have been researching the following questions:

What are the theoretical issues involved in the integration of literary texts into ELT curricula?

What are the structural/stylistic features of literary texts?

As all good students of literature know, literary texts come in an amazing variety of genres and sub-genres—far beyond the simple classic divisions of Poetry, Prose and Drama. Literary texts employ a huge range of rhetorical-literary devices and structures to persuade and seduce the reader and offer an opportunity to meet enhanced vocabulary in an authentic context as well as creative grammatico-syntactic structures.

How do literary texts affect the learner?

Literary texts affect readers in powerful ways. First, they motivate the reader through the feeling of accomplishment by participating in the enjoyment

of literature. Second they engage emotions and intellectual attention through the power of story and resonance with the human condition. They focus attention on the form of the language since it is that precise selection of words and turns of phrase that distinguish literature from mundane daily writings. This focus on form further assists learners to handle linguistic creativity—both their own and that of the world around them. Very importantly, literary texts expose learners to linguistic and conceptual metaphors that form the basis of much unspoken understandings and this in turn contributes to intercultural understanding and the development of an inquiring/critical mind.

What are some of the difficulties that may arise when using literary texts in language learning situations?

One difficulty that teachers reported regularly is the overwhelming choices of good material, also known as the candy store dilemma. The use of

literary texts is limited to teachers' knowledge of literary works—the more literary texts that teachers know and feel competent to use in their teaching the better, since it is up to teachers to match text choice with student linguistic/educational needs and current abilities. Another difficulty is related to time constraints. Long/complex works require time to process so when teachers are faced with short semesters with limited contact hours they might limit their selection of literary materials.

What are the characteristics of literary texts that are suited for use in ELT?

First and foremost is it important to find texts that match student interests and preoccupations since this will lead to better emotional engagement. Teachers also need to select text with which they can find ways to connect the themes to real world experience using a carefully planned and targeted focus. Regardless of the choice of text, it is recommended that teachers explore several/repeated approaches to same material—partly for their own pedagogical development/creativity and partly to find the optimal ways to engage with the material. But most important of all, the best/most suitable texts are those that are familiar to and enjoyed by the teacher. A teacher's own excitement and enjoyment of a text will be sensed and "caught" by the students—excitement can be contagious!

Why do teachers usually equate teaching literature with grammar translation?

Why does this approach continue to be popular?

There have been arguments that GTM is easier for teachers but this has never been verified through observation, measurement or systematic research. Certainly this represents a familiar style for teachers since many report having been taught that way themselves. This unfortunately continues the promulgation of persistent beliefs about learning/teaching that stifle the exploration of new techniques or the application of up-to-date research findings.

What are the pros and cons of such an approach?

Although GTM can be effective for certain (real world) purposes such as the training of translators and literary analysts who report their findings for their mother tongue community, a continued use of this approach can obscure and complicate and deaden the literary 'experience', thereby discouraging an engagement with literary texts for many normal learners who are not on this particularly narrow specialist academic track.

How are literary texts being used in other EFL contexts such as in Asia or in Europe?

In Belgium and the Netherlands, Story Telling Festivals (Vertelfestivals) are numerous and well funded by the government. One of the largest such festival, that takes place in Alden Biesen in Belgium, attracts close to 20,000 visitors each year. In addition to Story Telling Festivals, both the Belgian and Dutch governments include storytelling as part of their Erasmus teacher training programs. Furthermore in two cities in the Netherlands, storytelling has been integrated into the mainstream curriculum at elementary, junior and high school levels. Also, literature based CLT/CLIL courses are being taught in a humanistic framework at the high school level in Italy. These courses are designed to connect each student's experience and index culture and home language literature with the target foreign language's culture and literature. But, what we might describe as of the highest importance of literary texts used in the EFL context, such courses encourage self-expression and critical thinking.

It is incumbent upon all of us to find ways to develop a new theoretically grounded approach to the use of literary texts in ELT that is accessible and attractive to teachers in junior and senior high schools. This becomes a new priority for Japan in view of the repositioning of literary texts that has already been occurring in other EFL contexts such as in Asia and Europe.

Literary texts in ELT in Japan

Donna Tatsuki & Lori Zenuk-Nishide

*Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Graduate School for
English Language Education and Research*

In our presentation we began by sharing our views on the current state of literature in MEXT-approved textbook materials in secondary schools. Teaching and learning literature in English has devolved from being a core part of the English language curriculum to near non-existence. It has been argued this is “institutionally supported” as there has been no mention of literature in MEXT’s guidelines since 2003. In Japanese junior and senior high schools there are no compulsory English novels, and English textbooks include few if any short stories, or poetry. In the most recent MEXT reading guidelines for junior high school the words ‘stories’, ‘descriptive texts’, ‘messages’, ‘letters’, ‘written content’, and ‘content’ appear, but there is no reference to texts as being literary or non-literary.

This state of affairs is in sharp contrast to the 1950’s, when reading and appreciating literature was the major aim of English studies. Literature was read for enjoyment, and seen as a way of broadening knowledge beyond local and national boundaries. It was also regarded as a tool to teach students how to improve their academic writing. At that period of time, over one-third of the readings included in

school textbooks were authentic literary texts. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this has dropped to 5-20% and the texts provided in school textbooks are almost all simplified versions of the original material. Not only do students learn less vocabulary, they also have fewer encounters with words.

For most of the presentation, participants critically examined the physical and internal features of a high school MEXT approved literary text, to evaluate if CLT policies in the national curricula have been put into practice. The beliefs and assumptions of how language is or should be learned were revealed by examining the focus and sequence of the content as well as looking at the language, tasks, and the aims of the materials. In accordance with the MEXT 2013 guidelines participants made recommendations for better approaches to exploit stories contained in the textbooks in order to foster English use, integrate language skills and develop critical thinking.

Further discussion is needed on the use and abuse of literary texts and how to teach literature communicatively.