Critical review of literary reading and writing in a second language

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Many language teachers understand that the use of literature helps students' literacy practice in their first language (L1), but we know little about the effect of reading and writing literature on literacy development in second language (L2) education, especially within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. To gain a better understanding of this issue, it is crucial to clarify what has been done and what needs to be done in the study of literature in L2 education.

The aim of this article is to discuss the value of reading and writing literature in an L2. The article provides a critical review of the literature on literary reading and writing in ESL/EFL contexts, and identifies, using empirical evidence from previous studies, the potential of using literature as a way for developing L2 literacy.

Introduction: The Nature of Literary Learning in Second Language Contexts

The application of literary study in second language (L2) contexts is not as popular as it is in first language (L1) contexts (Iida, 2011). There are a number of possible reasons for this. To start with that vocabulary, grammatical structures, and syntax in literary texts make it difficult for L2 students to understand the content of literary texts (Chen, 2006; Lazar, 1994). Also, the focus of L2 learning is more on producing the target language accurately than on using it fluently so teachers tend to use drills rather than literature in the classroom (Zyngier, 1994). Furthermore, L2 students are expected to learn to write academically rather than creatively (Paran, 2006). Finally, reading literature is a time-consuming activity and is not seen as valuable by many teachers because they see no connection between literary learning and the development of L2 proficiency and may feel that the difficulty of the task would demotivate their students.

On the other hand, the study of literary education in L2 contexts is beginning to be developed and the research focus has shifted from a theoretical discussion to a more practical one that involves the use of empirical research on the effect of literature on L2 learning (Iida, 2012). Applied linguists have started to use this new empirical evidence to discuss the potential uses of literature in L2 learning. One of the possible uses of literature in L2 learning is the use of literature as a way to introduce the students to the social practices and norms of the L2 culture (Allington & Swann, 2009; Hall, 2005; Kim 2004). However, in both ESL and EFL contexts, the ultimate goal of language teaching is to develop both the oral and written communication skills of L2 students. Therefore, we still need to examine how teaching literature can contribute to the development of L2 communicative competence.

A number of previous studies have looked at the value of teaching literature in L2 contexts, the benefits of using literature in the L2 classroom include: developing L2 cultural awareness (Hanauer, 2001b; Wang, 2009; Zapata, 2005); enhancing L2 linguistic knowledge (Hanauer, 2001a; Iida, 2012; Paesani, 2005) promoting L2 communicative competence (Kim, 2004); gaining awareness of critical thinking (Lasker, 2007; Vandrick, 2003; Wang, 2009); and

helping self-discovery or personal growth (Hanauer, 2010).

Carter and Long (1991) propose three possible models of literature use in L2 classrooms: culture, language and personal growth. The cultural model regards literature as a way of presenting the sociocultural features and aspirations of the society from where the literature originates. The role of literature in this model is to transmit some important perspectives of the language community that the students are studying about. The language model views the use of literature as a way of reinforcing vocabulary, grammar or language manipulation with a special emphasis on providing students with authentic language texts. It enables L2 learners to study the target language as it functions in the real world, outside of the classroom. The personal growth model connects the experience of reading literature with each learner's development as a language learner. It views the interaction between the literary text and the reader as a way of encouraging learners to generate their own ideas and feelings. Zyngier (1994) argues that these three models help to expand the possibilities of teaching literature in L2 contexts. She also notes that teaching literature in the language classroom would allow students to become aware of the ideologies which underpin both the (L2) culture which produced the texts and the reader's own (L1) forms of social interaction.

Hanauer (2001b) presents us with a theoretical framework for teaching literary reading that focuses on the aspects of motivation, psycholinguistics and culture. The first part of this equation is the relationship between literature and motivation. Reading literature helps L2 learners to develop motivation for reading with enjoyment and personal involvement. The second aspect, the psycholinguistic aspect, is connected to the process of L2 learning: "the linguistic and textual properties of literary texts and the cognitive characteristics of literary reading interact with the second language learning process" (Hanauer, 2001b, p. 390). Reading poems, for instance, directs L2 learners to focus on linguistic forms as they engage in the process of negotiating meaning from the literary texts. The third aspect is

that of cultural awareness. Literary reading provides L2 learners with opportunities to develop a cultural knowledge of the target community.

Paran (2008) highlights the importance of teaching not only language but literature itself in using literature in L2 education. Doing so enables L2 learners to develop both literary and textual knowledge, including knowledge of both lexical and grammatical items. Paesani (2005) also supports this position and argues for the use of literary texts "as comprehensive input for the acquisition of grammatical forms and as the basis for meaning, form-focused communicative language use" (p. 22). This argument, the use of literature as a means, not as an end, is crucial because L2 learning is "not about simply learning new linguistic forms, but it is about learning how to construct, exchange, and interpret signs that have been created by someone else" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 22). All of these frameworks agree that the use of literature can help to facilitate L2 learning and that the literature itself has the potential to motivate L2 learners to read (Kim, 2004; Paran, 2008; Vandrick, 2003; Wang, 2009).

Literature, as an example of authentic language, also "potentially play[s] a role in facilitating the learner's access to this English-using culture" (Hall, 2005, p. 55). Because language and culture are inseparable the use of literature is important because it can lead to better cultural understanding of the target community, which is necessary for learning the target language (Kramsch, 1993). The use of literature in the language classroom can calso help with the development of L2 learners' awareness of intercultural understanding. Hanauer (2003) illustrates the relationship between the nature of literature and culture taking poetry as an example: "poetry offers the opportunity of the entry of cross-cultural personal understanding as well as the site of explicit negotiation of linguistic structures" (p. 85). In other words, literature in L2 education can allow students to become more sensitive to the target culture through the reflection and comparison of their own culture with the culture that produced the texts that they are reading. In this sense, the use of literature is "a powerful way of knowing about oneself and the

world" (Chen, 2006, p. 211). Iida (2008, 2010) also addresses this issue by carefully looking at the nature of *haiku* as a literary genre: *haiku* is used as a way for the authors to express their identifiable voices and to reflect on the natural world. From this perspective, the role of literature in language education is to make connections between internal and external worlds of the individual (Hanauer, 2004).

This convergence of literature, language and culture represents a theoretical framework that supports the use of teaching literature in the L2 classroom. As we have seen, there is an argument to be made for using literature in L2 learning, but the effects of literature on L2 literacy development still needs to be examined empirically. Specifically, we need to examine in what ways the use of literature in the classroom helps students with their L2 learning. The remaining sections of this article address this issue by focusing on a number of empirical studies that have been done on the effects of reading and writing literature in the L2 classroom on students' L2 learning.

Literary Reading in a Second Language

While there are an increasing number of studies being done on the use of literature in the language classroom, this field is still in its infancy. Paran (2008) conducted a survey on the current state of research articles on literature use in L2 education and he notes the lack of empirical studies. His survey also showed that almost all the studies focus on the effects of reading literature on L2 learning (e.g., Chen 2006; Hanauer, 2001a; Kim, 2004; Wang, 2009).

Hanauer (2001a), for example, discusses the use of poetry reading in the L2 classroom. He investigated the process by which pairs of advanced Hebrew speakers of English in a teacher's training college in Israel ought to understand an English poem. His study showed that L2 learners were able to construct meaning from these texts by using their existing linguistic knowledge and then applying that knowledge in a creative way to construct meaning. In addition, this task allowed the learners to 'focus on form' as they were able to use the poems to "extend their understanding of the potential range of uses and meanings of existing linguistic structure" (Hanauer 2001a, p. 319). This study provides some empirical evidence that poetry reading can be an effective task for advanced learners and may be effective in helping them to develop L2 linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Kim (2004) also addresses the significance of using literature in L2 education. Kim explored the effect of literature discussions on classroom interactions among nine adult ESL students in an advanced class at an American university. The aim of this study was to examine the features of student interactions with literary texts (e.g., a short story and a novel) and with their peers, and look at the relationship between these interactions and the learners' language development. The qualitative analysis of classroom discourse showed that literature discussions had the potential to engage students in enjoyable reading, enabled them to practice the target language through active social interactions, and gave them the opportunity to express themselves meaningfully in English. These findings seem to indicate that literature can provide students with a chance to develop their ability to comprehend texts, to reflect on their personal values and experiences, to respond to cross-cultural topics, and to interpret a text and critically evaluate it. This study also showed that literature circles which allow students to interact with literary texts (focus on form) and to respond and interact with other students (extended discussion), promoted their L2 communicative competence.

Another empirical study of literary reading was conducted by Wang (2009). This study evaluated the value of using novels in advanced-level first year classes at a university in Taiwan. The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of 162 college freshmen toward the use of literature in the classroom, the effects of watching the film adaptation of a novel on DVD before reading the book, and the effect of the literature instruction on their L2 reading and listening skills. In this study, literature instruction was shown to promote students' reading, translation, vocabulary, problem-analysis, grammar, rhetoric, listening, speaking and writing abilities. In addition, watching the novel on DVD helped students in their comprehension of the story. As a result, students were

able to achieve outstanding scores in both reading and listening tests. This study illustrates a model of using literature for the development of both students' overall English skills and their L2 cultural knowledge in advanced-level English courses.

Thus, we can see that empirical studies of the use of literature in the language classroom provide support to the theoretical rationale of using literature in L2 education. Despite the difference in genres, practical approaches, and contexts, the use of literature has been shown to have a positive impacts on L2 learning. These empirical studies provide us with support to the idea that literature can be used to enhance linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target community as well as to develop the students' L2 communicative competence. This supports Carter and Long's (1991) thesis that the integration of language and literature works on different levels and can be used to achieve a diverse number of goals.

Literary Writing in a Second Language

To date very few empirical studies have been done on the use of writing literature in the L2 classroom (Hanauer, 2010; Iida, 2012). This may be due to the fact that most university writing classes tend to teach academic writing and students are expected to write with the grammatical 'accuracy' rather than creatively. As a result, most studies of L2 literary writing that focus on writing literature do so as part of an integrated approach whereby students are asked to both read and write literature in the classrooms.

Hirvela (2005), for instance, addresses the use of literature in ESL composition courses. He investigated 195 ESL students' attitudes toward reading literature, and literature-based writing in composition courses. His study involved dividing ESL college freshmen into two groups: the first group was assigned to read a short novel and write a formal academic essay in response: the second group was assigned to read the same novel as the first group and write their response paper in a more informal manner, through journal entries. An attitude questionnaire indicated that approximately 60 % of students in both groups had a positive attitude toward reading literature in English, and that approximately 67%

of students regarded literature-based writing (e.g., formal response essay, literary journal) as a useful academic writing experience; in other words, many ESL students viewed the inclusion of literature in the classroom as helpful in the improvement of their academic writing abilities. A significant finding was that "ESL students will support, albeit moderately, writing *about* literature directed toward academic literacy ends; what they will oppose is writing *for* literature" (Hirvela, 2005, p. 76).

Chen (2006) examined the effects of both reading and writing literature on students enrolled in a college composition course at a university in Taiwan. Chen looked at the effect of reading children's literature on the development of the writing abilities and narrative thinking of 43 college freshmen. Their reflective comments and responses in an interview about the literature-based tasks indicated that the features of children's literature (e.g., the simplicity of language style, a variety of cultural information, and comfortable length of stories) were perceived to facilitate the student's reading comprehension and that this genre knowledge, obtained through reading stories, could be applied to the student's own writing practice. The research showed that the students' chosen texts provided good writing samples for their own stories and enhanced their sense of authorship. This study provides empirical support for the theory that the reading and writing of literature should be taught together (Grabe, 2003; Hirvela, 2004; Vandrick, 2003).

While Hirvela (2005) and Chen (2006) investigated students' perceptions of literature on their own language learning, Hanauer (2010) conducted research on the relationship between writing poetry and second language learning. They looked at 844 poems written by 81 advanced ESL learners at an American university. These poems were analyzed for their textual and literary characteristics which involved: text size analysis, linguistic category analysis, lexical frequency profile, poetic features, thematic organization, lexical content analysis, and expressed emotion analysis. This analysis showed that L2 poetry was short, personal, descriptive and direct. In addition, it revealed that the poetry involved the

"individual perspective on particular events and experiences" and "the emotional states of the writer", and "a process of self-reflection" (Hanauer, 2010, p. 53).

Hanauer (2010) also conducted a case study of poetic identity by analysing a book of poetry created by a female ESL student in Japan. The book entitled 'Family' consisted of ten poems, the theme of each poem was connected to her parents' divorce, an event that occurred when she was a high school student. By analysing each of the poems in the book Hanauer was able to construct a picture of the writer's history of change, during the time-period in which she moved from the feelings of shock and confusion over her parents' divorce to a position of accepting it. This picture includes the maturation of her understanding of gender roles, and the development of her ability to live alone. This case study shows the potential of poetry writing as a window into a greater understanding of the writer's identity- "the history of developing subject positions designed to explore, understand and negotiate different ways of being in the world" (Hanauer, 2010, p. 73) – as well as their progress as a second language learner.

Most recently, Iida (2012) has reported on the value of *haiku* writing in a second language in a Japanese college context. This study investigated how a six-week *haiku* writing exercise affected the students ability to write prose. The results of this study indicate that haiku writing had a positive effect on the students' prose writing development. The effects of writing haiku on prose writing were that: the total words used in texts increased in the post-*haiku* essay; students used impersonal pronouns more in the post-essay than in the pre-essay; and students demonstrated a greater ability to write their ideas in a direct and succinct way in the post-essay. This study supports Hanauer's (2011) theoretical assumption that learning one genre will have an influence on students' abilities to function in another genre. This , in turn supports the use of literature in L2 writing classes, even if the final goal of the class is the production of an academic essay.

Despite a limited number of empirical studies, research on writing literature has (re)constructed theories of the place of literature in the L2 writing classroom. Recent studies (e.g., Hanauer, 2010: Iida 2012) have provided empirical evidence that L2 learners have the ability to produce literary texts; and this opens a new possibility for using literature as a method for students to gain more experience writing in the target language. While it is still early, literature seems to have a place in the future of L2 education, even in the academic writing classroom (Hirvela, 2005; Iida, 2012).

Conclusions

This article has explored the use of literature in L2 contexts from both a theoretical and an empirical viewpoint. Previous studies of L2 literary learning present us with a picture of how literature can be used in language learning (and teaching). They show us that literature can be employed by the teacher to work at a number of different levels, for different goals, and in different contexts. The use of literature enables students to develop L2 linguistic knowledge and language awareness, communicative competence, cultural knowledge of the target language, critical thinking skills, helps their level motivation, and provides them with emotional engagement. In particular, L2 literary writing provides students with opportunities to express their own thoughts about different subjects and the world, and to negotiate and construct meaning by placing their own perspectives or emotional states at the centre in their writing processes.

The theoretical framework of teaching literature emphasizes the use of literature as a way for students to gain experience with actually using the target language as well as developing their linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical knowledge. In this sense, it is important for each instructor to consider *how* to use literature, rather than *whether* they should use it in the L2 classroom; in other words, the use of literature should be a *means*, not an *end* in L2 education. It may be challenging for L2 learners to read and write literature in the target language, but L2 literature has the potential to improve their overall English skills. Further research and further discussion on the effects of L2 literature and language learning is

clearly required, but the initial empirical evidence suggests that using L2 literature in the language classroom can help students to acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge in the target language, to gain genre-specific knowledge, and to develop (academic) literacy skills.

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