

Literature in a Foreign Tongue: Some Thoughts on the Use of Literature in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Slimane Belhaddad. LITERATURE IN A FOREIGN TONGUE: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE USE OF LITERATURE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Abstract. The article deals with the much debated question of using literature in the foreign language classroom. First, it discusses the pros and cons of including literary texts in the FL curricula. On the one hand, some researchers argue that there is no benefit to be gained from teaching literature in a FL classroom because it has no added value as to the main objectives set in learning a foreign language. On the other hand, educationalists consider literature to be of vital importance in any attempt to learn a foreign language. They state that the literary text is an authentic replica of the language. The article also offers a brief review of the main approaches that have been adopted in teaching literature in a FL context. Finally, an illustration is provided of how literary texts can be exploited so as to motivate FL learners.

Keywords: Literature, language, FL teaching and learning, FL teaching methods, linguistics

Слиман Белхаддад. ЛИТЕРАТУРАТА НА ЧУЖД ЕЗИК: РАЗМИШЛЕНИЯ ВЪРХУ ИЗПОЛЗВАНЕТО НА ЛИТЕРАТУРА В ОБУЧЕНИЕТО ПО ЧУЖД ЕЗИК

Резюме. Статията обръща внимание спорния въпрос относно използването на литературни текстове в чуждоезиковото обучение. В началото са представени гледните точки, които разглеждат предимствата и недостатъците на включването на литературни текстове в програмата по чуждоезиково обучение. От една страна, някои изследователи спорят, че няма полза от изучаването на езика чрез литература, тъй като тя не предлага нищо стойностно към основните цели на чуждоезиковото обучение. От друга, педагозите отделят на литературата важно значение във всеки един начин на изучаване на чужд език. Те твърдят, че литературният текст е автентична реплика на езика. Статията предлага и кратко резюме на основните подходи, които се използват

в контекста на чуждоезиковото обучение. В края се дава пример как литературният текст може да бъде използван, за да мотивира изучаващите чужд език.

Ключови думи: литература, език, преподаване и изучаване на чужд език, преподавателски методи в чуждоезиковото обучение, лингвистика

Introduction

Foreign language learning represents, undoubtedly, a gateway for other cultures and civilisations. It is a field that attracts a host of specialists from a broad scope of disciplines, namely psychology, linguistics, sociology, history and neurology. In order to acquire a foreign language in a most appropriate way and, preferably, in a relatively short time many methods and approaches were devised, in the past, to attain this objective.

In their quest of acquiring each other's languages, humans have developed many ways until they were able to reach today's modern scientific methods. Based on an eclectic method and not relying solely on the teaching of Grammar these approaches provide them with some tools to uncover the intricacies and the unknown aspects of the language learning process. Nowadays, language teaching comprises a variety of such tools and techniques that can be used even outside the classroom: the World Wide Web and the mobile phone are but an illustration of this breakthrough.

Together with the time-old prescriptive method of teaching how to talk correctly, i.e., learning grammar by heart and applying its rules, the sounds of a language have been given attention as well as the meaning conveyed by the speaker and how it is perceived by the listener.

Meanwhile, the FLT research field has witnessed important steps in the last decades. Learning a foreign language has been under scientific scrutiny since the second half of the twentieth century. With the emergence of Linguistics as an independent scientific discipline, language has been studied from the perspective of its different components, i.e., phonological, semantic, syntactic and even neurologic allowing a more rational view of this human characteristic.

With the help of the internet and the social media, things are becoming easier for language study and research. The contact with the foreign language and subsequently with the cultural heritage it carries as well as the exchange of experiences between educationalists and language researchers characterise our contemporary era. Today, a student in Africa, for instance, can have access to the most recent research findings carried out in the US or the UK provided he owns a computer and have a connection to the internet.

However, one aspect that has probably been given less attention is that of the role literature plays in the field of language learning and teaching. Early studies on language teaching and acquisition have put much attention on the linguistic

side of the language with much more emphasis on its spoken aspect. As Collie and Slater (1992: 2) pointed out, one of the main reasons for this disequilibrium is that “literature was thought of as embodying a static, convoluted kind of language far removed from the utterances of daily communication”.

The literary language is considered to be of no help because of its inappropriateness and difficulty to meet these needs. It is rejected, as Collie & Slater (1992: 2) stress, because «literature was seen as carrying an undesirable freight of cultural connotations». Thus, what matters most in language teaching has always been of a ‘hic et nunc’ interest, a type of pragmatic language that is used to communicate instantly without any need for a more proficient or sophisticated comprehension of the language.

It has also been argued that the objective that lies behind learning a foreign language is essentially to use it in everyday life, for instance to ask for help, correspond with foreigners, use it in travel, for trade, advertisement etc. The type of the literary language that is ambiguous and misunderstood is of no immediate value.

Furthermore, since teaching literature tends, generally, to come after a certain level of language has been attained by the learner, there seems to be a lesser need for its teaching before this stage. Because literature uses a different kind of language with a limited access to a minute audience and being closely linked to the cultural aspects, knowing these aspects is a prerequisite to the understanding of the former.

It is worth noting that research in literature in FL education is less developed than in other aspects of the language (Paran 2008). It is often taken for granted that the mastery of the linguistic aspect of the language precedes and leads automatically to the competence in the understanding of a foreign literature. In addition, many researchers believe that literature is not “teachable”. According to them, literature cannot be taught in the same manner as other sciences or any transmissible knowledge (Benazout, 2010). Moreover, Todorov (2007: 17) states that literary critics, a number of writers, have through their desire to cut literature off the world imposed a vision reduced to the absurd”.

Notwithstanding these assertions, some researchers turned their attention to the teaching of literature in a foreign language class (Carter 2007; Liskin-Gasparro 1999; Paran 2008). According to Barthes (2000), the desacralized literature has been given access to the class and has left back the prestige it once had becoming, consequently, a teachable object.

One can also argue that most of the texts used in the FLT class are, more or less, of a literary nature. Murdoch (1992) affirmed that many researchers point out the use of literature in a foreign language teaching class. Their studies emphasise the positive results that the use of literary texts has engendered in relation to the stimulation of the learners’ imagination and the creation of an interactive context in the class.

As a result, Literature can contribute to the development of the learners' characters, construct their affective growth and empower them with more critical tools that will enable them to grasp and, for some, to integrate the target language culture. Indeed, while reading a literary text, the student is in a real communication with the author, listening to him, making interpretations and delving into the culture realm the language reflects.

To show the impact of reading a literary text in a foreign language, it is noteworthy to give illustrations of famous authors and main figures in the English, French or Russian literature, to cite but a few, who were not natives but who have learnt a foreign language and mastered its rules. Joseph Conrad, Tzvetan Todorov, Milan Kundera, and Nikolay Gogol may be included in this category. Others master more than one language and reading the works of Samuel Becket, for instance, gives the impression that he is French in regard to his mastery of this language.

In order to understand the role literature plays in the learning/teaching of a foreign language, the rationale for this use will be presented in a twofold aspect: firstly, the point of view of the researchers who are against the inclusion of any literature in the foreign language class; and secondly, the defenders of its use and inclusion in the FLT curriculum.

After that, the different approaches to literature use in the FL classroom will be reviewed in order to try to delimit the boundaries and the evolution of the theoretical background as well as its implementation.

Finally, the choice of the literary text that will be dealt with in the FL classroom will be discussed with a reference to some main scholars' views.

Literature in the FL classroom, what for?

Many researchers point out the supremacy of the linguistic aspect in learning a foreign language over the inclusion of any other component that may divert from the main aim of enabling the learners to communicate and use correctly the foreign language. Some of them go further so as to question the benefit of teaching literature to the learners of a foreign language.

One might contend the validity of raising such a question and argue that the use of literature in the foreign language class is self-evident. Indeed, what does teaching imply throughout all stages of the learning process if not samples of literary texts like poems, novels, plays and short stories?

But what generally seems to be an axiom may cover in reality many facts that cannot be discovered without a close scrutiny of the subject under study. Generally, those literary texts that are used in the language class are mere extracts of much larger volumes of literary works. They do not reflect literature in its strictest sense.

Furthermore, the attention as to the use of literature in the foreign language teaching-learning context stems from the various observations both foreign language teachers and learners make once engaged in the teaching/learning task. Be-

ing in a constant contact and interacting with the numerous learning materials, for instance the target language cultural content, give rise to different perceptions and attitudes on the part of teachers and learners alike.

In fact, in our global village no one is living as a recluse, using, hearing and/or responding exclusively in his own language. The days when people lived in closed communities and were practically monolingual are dead and gone. Globalisation and its major alter ego, the information and communication technology (ICT), have revolutionised the contact between human communities that used to live apart and foreign to each other. Even in remote areas, one can be exposed to a foreign language and, thus, be in a direct contact to another culture different from his/her own.

Being, thus, in a constant relation with many aspects of different cultures and people, namely through advertisement, pictures, news, movies and documentaries raises curiosity as to the meaning of the message that is conveyed and to the ways of approaching the culture carried out by it.

The interest also rises because of the relevance of each people's culture and, more particularly literature, to the acquisition process of their language. Besides this, similar single experiences are being lived by teachers and students worldwide for they are the ones in charge of the transmission of knowledge.

Literature is then of a cardinal relevance in the consolidation of the learners' awareness and in their quest to have an acceptable mastery of a language. It can also help arouse learners' imagination, develop their critical abilities and increase their emotional awareness (Lazar 1993). It is also a motivating factor and a drive that drives the learner to exteriorise what he feels and give his personal response to the themes developed in the literary work under study.

Moreover, it brings an aesthetic experience to the foreign language class. Students can be acquainted with the world of imagination and fiction that will help them be eager to engage in reading activities both in class and, once they have gained a certain linguistic competence in literary text, be independent and choose to read a book of their choice.

In our globalised world, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to avoid being in contact with a literary work whether in a written form, on the net or adapted for the screen. Literature is a daily companion to us even if it is in different aspects. But the problem lies in the ways of getting the learners to be interested in literature in its pure form, for this is where the stress should be put. Arming them with the necessary tools to grasp the literary language code and to appreciate what they are reading, is to enable them to improve their learning capacities and to stimulate their artistic curiosity (Carter 2007).

Literature plays a crucial role in the process of language learning. It is not, as some might suggest, a mere parroting of classical or modern novelists, dramatists or poets. It is a component of the learning techniques the teacher uses in order to lead his/her students to be interested not only in the linguistic rules of the lan-

guage they are learning; but more importantly, as put out by Parkinson and Thomas (2000) to allow them to have access to a high level of writing, to an authentic input material, to train their memory and to widen their cultural knowledge.

In order to reach such objectives and pave the way for a more practical use of literature in the teaching-learning situation, many attempts were carried out to devise a more appropriate approach to the inclusion of literature in the foreign language learning process.

Approaches to literature use in the language class

The question of using literature in the language class has been a subject of controversy for all those concerned with the language field, namely teachers, learners and researchers alike from the beginning of the twentieth century. Literature was restricted to a certain social class and, henceforth, seen as an elevated category of language that cannot be taught in the FL class because it necessitates a rich background in the culture of the target language. The foreign language learner lacks this knowledge because he/she is first learning the basics of the language and, secondly, it takes him/her time and effort to reach quasi-native speaker's knowledge of the language he/she is learning.

The inclusion of literature in the FL classroom has witnessed different attitudes depending on the era and type of approach used. Like the other language acquisition components such as linguistic and psychological, the literature element has gone through different stages of rise and fall then resurgence.

To explicit more this situation, a brief review of the different FL approaches to the use of literature in the foreign language teaching classroom is needed.

The Grammar-translation method

The early attempts to use literature in the FL classroom, mainly at the beginning of the twentieth century, consisted of what is known as the Grammar-translation method. This approach involved a set of texts that were presented to the learner as a model for a perfect learning material in a foreign language. The texts comprised grammatical aspects such as conjugations, vocabulary learning, and translation from and into the learner's mother tongue. All this was accompanied by an intensive and, somehow, straining exercise of memorisation. The mother tongue is used to render easy some difficult concepts in the target language.

The positive achievement of using such a method is the authenticity of the input. The texts chosen to be taught are those belonging to famous authors whose style is considered to be a perfect reflection in terms of the strictness of the grammatical and rhetorical rules governing the language use. What is sought by the teacher in this approach is the accuracy in the use of language (Brown 2007).

Emphasis was put on the written form accompanied with some reading but with no place left for speaking or listening skills in the language class. The reason put

forward to explain such an omission is that the two mentioned language skills were considered as secondary and useless components of the learning process. What mattered was the input (text) at the end of which a selected set of words are translated in the mother tongue.

It is not unfair to say that the Grammar translation method had had some success in the teaching/learning of foreign languages. Generations of proficient people were taught according to this method, and a great number among them didn't leave their country to live and communicate with the native speakers of the language they learnt.

However, the drawbacks of this approach are numerous. It lacks the interactive mood that a learning situation requires and the degree of reformulation/imitation of the selected text in the learner's language is the unique yardstick against which the success or failure of the learner can be checked. Furthermore, the teacher is the center of attention besides a passive learner who acts as a mere container.

The Direct method and the Audio-lingual Approach

In the middle of the twentieth century, the educational field witnessed great changes that went along with the major events that characterized that period in human history. The need to learn and acquire foreign languages gained more attention and literature was not a priority anymore in the curricula of FL teaching (Carter 2007).

It was a time when different nations faced the necessity to secure information and keep abreast of other countries' languages. This was mainly felt at the aftermath of World War II and, consequently, linguistic as well as psychological research flourished. The behaviourist theory principles of stimulus-response were applied on humans as far as reinforcing what is perceived as a correct behaviour while giving negative feedback to errors. A similar approach began to be applied in the language learning field.

The Audio-lingual and the Direct methods were the main features of this new approach to teaching foreign languages. But, literature lost its place in the language class to the benefit of developing the communicative competence of the learner. There was no use of literary material in the class and literature went into oblivion.

These new methods fostered the process of repetition and acquisitions of language patterns and sentences achieving some interesting results. However, making no use of literature in their curricula deprived learners from an important aspect of the learning process and considering all errors as a constraint to the acquisition process hastened their end.

The Communicative Approach

As a response to the dominance of language teaching whose main concern was the intensive use of grammar and target language material, a new approach was designed in the 70's of the last century. This latter put emphasis on the way language is used, i.e., what is important is the message conveyed rather than the correctness of the language usage. It relied much more on interaction using authentic texts and communication, negotiation and role playing. Communication became the main concern in the language class and literature regained some of its place. Literary components of language were inserted in the curricula for their meaningfulness for language competence and performance.

Literature reappears once again in the language class and many FL researchers recognize literature's role in stimulation learners' communication potential. The richness of the literary teaching material such as plays, dialogues, novels, short stories accompanied with a debate in the classroom give rise to an exchange of opinions that might motivate learners to study.

Appeals for the intensive use of literature in foreign language learning have been made by many researchers (Gadjusek 1988; Collie and Slater 1992), and some educationalists called for a combination of many approaches. They state that focusing on one aspect of language learning will not yield the desired results; whereas it would be more beneficial for a language teacher to use an eclectic method. Some Grammar translation method techniques are still useful and if combined with the other approaches would help learners master the language. In addition to the above-mentioned approaches, there are new methods of teaching literature (Padurean 2015).

Bobkina (2014) highlighted Maley's distinction between studying literature as a subject and using literature to learn a language. In fact, there is an important difference between the two approaches. While the former is aimed at more proficient learners of the language with a background in literary studies, the latter deals with the use of language through literary texts.

Other methods (Carter and Long cited in Padurean 2015; Carter and Mc Rae 1996) have been presented that involved three models; namely the language, the cultural and the personal growth.

The language model

The emphasis is put, here, on the acquisition of the language by the learner based on grammar, vocabulary and discourse components of the language. Sounds, meanings and genres are also a part of this model. The lesson may encompass work with reading, writing and listening to texts and speaking. Nursel Içoz (1992) states that "the more closely students, especially non-natives, attend to the language of a text, the more confidently they will be able to account for its meaning", emphasizing thus the importance of the linguistic competence a learner should have.

The cultural model

The precursors of this model insist on the fact that literature implies all what is related to a given culture like history, mythology, customs and way of life. The foreign language learner will be able to deal with and be aware of other aspects of human culture that are different from his or her. This will help him/her to widen his/her knowledge and be more tolerant to the differences that characterise humans.

The Personal Growth model

As its name suggests, this model stresses the holistic aspect of the language learning process. It is a natural way where learners take part in discovering meaning and participate actively in the learning process rather than receiving passively instructions and information from teachers (Carter and Long 1991). This model is linked to the Reader Response Theory (Van 2009 cited by Bobkina 2014). The learner engages, thus, in an intellectual and emotional experience that empowers him in the domain of literature.

One has to mention also the integrated model, which represents a synthesis not only of the three aforementioned models but also of other types of literature use in teaching a foreign language. For example, the Tasmanian's Integrative Model was developed by Australian researchers (Tasmanian Curriculum 2012 cited in Bobkina 2014). According to this point of view, the literary perspective, the social, cultural and linguistic elements have to be taken into consideration in any attempt at addressing the use of literature in the language class.

It is noteworthy to state that these models are best understood with the selections of the literary texts to be used by teachers in the language class. The following section shall explicit this more.

Selecting literary texts for the Foreign Language classroom

Different FL theories have explored the domain of using literature in learning a foreign language: Schmidt's incidental learning (1994), Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) and Ellis's task-based language learning and teaching (2003). In the last two decades, using literary texts in the teaching of a foreign language has regained interest and educationalists are developing more and more implementation tools to motivate their students to read and practice the language through literature excerpts.

In fact, the principal challenge that faces researchers in the field of foreign language learning, curriculum designers and teachers alike is the choice of the type of texts to use in a foreign language class. There are a variety of literary forms ranging from the simple language of a story or a legend to the most sophisticated and intricate work of art, such as an epic poem or an existentialist novel. Similarly, the relevance of these texts to the FL class depends mostly on the type of learners, their age and the level of their proficiency in the foreign language.

As George S. Murdoch (1992) states, any successful attempt at introducing literature in the language course is dependent on the appropriate choice of the text. It goes without saying that the literary texts should be appropriate to the learners and the topics they deal with must reflect the interests of both teachers and learners and meet their needs. Moreover, Içoz (1992) referred to some factors to take into account for a better understanding, appreciation and evaluation of a literary text:

Firstly, she stresses that unless the cognitive development of the learner is considered; his/her response and attitude towards the presented text would be a hit and miss operation. There are various levels of literary texts and adapting each one to the corresponding audience of learners will undoubtedly help them to experience the aesthetic side of the text and take part in the debate that it can provoke.

Secondly, some preliminary knowledge of the literary conventions is a prerequisite for any text appreciation by the learner. Being aware of the devices used in a literary text, namely character, plot, motivation etc. can facilitate the task set to the learner and enable him to get more involved in the discovery of the meaning of a given literary text.

Other researchers (Daskalovska and Dimova 2012) point out the importance of the “expressive function” that teaching the material should convey. That is, the learners’ interest should be stimulated by a text that captures their attention and imagination so as to become active participants in the language class. This is in opposition to the mimic situation where the language used is that “which communicates one level, usually in terms of information being sought or given” (Mc Rae 1991 cited in Daskalovska and Dimova 2012).

The two researchers refer to another component of the literary text teaching, i.e., creativity. In our daily life, we use language in different situations and take it for granted that some idiomatic expressions, figurative language and metaphors we use are easily understood by others. We seldom realize the fact that we are in the realm of creativity. In fact, each language bears the indirect, subtle and symbolic meaning which is a reflection of the universality of human nature.

Daskalovska and Dimova (2012) argue that using texts that are rich in cultural references and creativity are likely to represent what is actually happening in a community of speakers and will increase literary awareness.

Likewise, exploiting authentic literary texts will involve learners in genuine activities that are not artificial. This will arouse their motivation to read and consolidate their confidence in their capacity to learn the language. As Widdowson (1992: 32) put it, this will enable them to be highly aware of “how language can mean [...] to express perspectives on familiar reality”. In other words, to be fully engaged in discovering the meaning of the different lexemes, concepts and ways of conveying a message that is different from the direct transparent language used ordinarily.

Additionally, George S. Murdoch (1992) considers that the use of prose instead of poetry is more likely to prepare learners for a better understanding of the lessons and meet their needs. According to him, poetry is a sophisticated type of language that requires a certain competence, familiarity and background in literature conventions.

Murdoch's argument as to the competence requirements for a poetry learner seems adequate. However, introducing this kind of language, though it is difficult to grasp, will acquaint the students to another figurative language characterized by its elliptical style. More practice and guidance from the teacher will, also, render the task easier for the students.

Besides, another element that is preferably needed in a literary text is accessibility. That is to say, an extremely complicated coded text will be problematic to any learner and may hinder him to engage in the process of appreciating the material that is presented to him. Furthermore, if this text is of no interest or has no link to his experience, this would distance him/her from the learning objectives set out by curriculum designers. The text chosen should fit the learner's cognitive ability.

Last but not least, the choice of the text should take into account its appropriateness. Murdoch (1992: 3) insists that in many languages teaching situations all over the world, there are some cultural factors that have an impact on the text selection and use in the language class. He states that: "in some societies, texts that deal with certain aspects of human relationships or political themes might prove problematic". This is true because what is considered as normal in one society might be interpreted as uncomfortable in another.

Conclusion

The use of literature in foreign language teaching has been one of the themes that have been given attention by researchers and educationalists. The opinions for its inclusion in the FL programmes and curricula have gained a growing importance in the quest for finding the best ways to teach a foreign language. However, some resistance by certain researchers continues to be observed as far as the necessity and utility of literature to the language learning process is concerned.

This question has gone through various stages in the last one hundred years. Many approaches have been developed so as to benefit from literature in FLT. Thus, literary texts have been used and translated into the language of teaching for their reliability as models of a perfect language. Then, they were sacrificed for the sake of teaching learners how to use the language as it is actually spoken by its speakers. Moreover, as research in the FL field advanced, more emphasis was put on the communicative element of the language with the inclusion of literature.

With this coming back of literature as a principle component of foreign language teaching, the attention shifted to the conceptions of new modalities and techniques that will enable teachers and learners to explore the different aspects of the

literary text use. Many models for the use of literature in the FL designed that have contributed to motivating learners and providing them with unlimited opportunities to learn a foreign language.

Literature in language teaching has become more flexible and the literary texts can be used for aesthetic appreciation, self-esteem, and language acquisition (Carter 2007). It will equally reinforce the learner's communicative competence and consolidate the four skills mastery; provide him with 'language consciousness', a prerequisite for any attempt to succeed in learning a foreign language.

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