

Approaches to teaching literature. An Overview

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Key-words: cultural approach, language approach, personal growth model, stylistics, films

Abstract

This article is intended to describe some of the most common approaches used when teaching literature. There is, of course, a plethora of reasons in favour of using literature in the EFL classes and films as a supplementary material. One of these reasons is that literature provides authentic material and films provide exposure to more authentic language and context. Moreover, visual images stimulate students' perceptions directly by bringing the real world into the class. Several researchers', scholars' and educators' works on the use of these approaches will be considered in the current article.

To begin with, Bill Bowler reviews the role of literature in classes and starts by saying that for many years, literature was perceived as the only way to get inside a nation's culture. Similarly, Ronald Carter claims that: "the study of certain classic pieces of English literature is considered a sine qua non for the truly educated person." (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 1) However, both Carter and Bowler notice that in the 1970s and 1980s there was a raising interest in the use of authentic materials in classes such as timetables or newspapers extracts and literature was put aside. Bowler considers that nowadays more and more teachers teach literature in an interactive and entertaining way.

Carter identifies three reasons to teach literature: the cultural, the language and the personal growth model. Carter considers that: "teaching literature within a cultural model enables students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space and to come to perceive tradition of thought, feeling and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows." (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 2).

According to Carter, the cultural model is associated with a teacher centred approach. As part of this approach teachers have the tendency to ask questions to elicit the meaning of some words or to find out general information about some characters or symbols. However, Carter urges that this approach "focuses on the small unit, the discrete point; at its worst the class spends a lot of time worrying or agonising about a single word which may have no great significance in an appreciation of the whole work. Secondly, it can become as teacher-centred as the lecture; all decision-taking is in the hands of the teacher. [...] Thirdly, if such a process is the regular or frequent mode of presentation it seems designed rather for what we might call the 'short-term pay-off' than the longer term growth of the literary text as a 'treasured object.'" (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 24)

Thus, Carter emphasises that a teacher-centred approach would provide students with little opportunity to express their own opinions and feelings whereas a student-centred literature

class will encourage students to explore more the literary text and “to develop their own responses and sensitivities. It leads learners to make their own judgements and to refine and develop their techniques for doing this so that they can apply them to a wider range of texts for their own benefit.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 25) Carter also observes that if students develop personal opinions it means that they have read the text and “the reading should have been in itself a literary experience.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 25)

At the same time Carter reveals that even if the teacher and the student- centred approaches are different they cannot exclude each other. For instance, “even so-called student-centred classes require the active involvement of the teacher.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 27) This means that teachers have to organise and monitor the student-centred classes in an effective way. For instance, Carter advises teachers that instead of stating the topic of a certain literary text, they should allow the students to discover the topic by themselves.

Obviously, as Carter notices literature has a beneficial impact on the acquisition of language. The language –based approach is learner-centred and activity based. Carter considers that the language-based approach enables students “to secure an initial ‘way-in’ or access to literary texts.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 11) Thus, a language based approach would focus on integrating and extending students’ grammar and lexical knowledge.

Enlarging on this approach, Lazar advocates the advantages of the above mentioned approach: “The advantages of using literary texts for language activities are that they offer a wide range of styles and registers; they are open to multiple interpretations and hence provide excellent opportunities for classroom discussions; and they focus on genuinely and motivating topics to explore in the classroom.” (Gillian Lazar, 1993:27)

The personal growth model engages students into the reading of literary texts by linking the topics of the text to their own personal experiences. Therefore, Carter reveals the following approach: “The study of literary texts [...] involves acquiring a compendious store of information about the history of the target literature, its traditions and conventions, its particular heritage, the nature of the influences and relationships between the authors, texts and contexts which make up that literary culture.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 3). Consequently, **literature as personal enrichment** would have as a central point the developing of students’ personal opinions, feelings and emotions.

On the same note, Lazar also emphasises that educators should insist on activities that encourage students to share their feelings and opinions because in this way they will: “express their own personal responses to [...] multiple levels of meaning [which] can only serve to accelerate the students’ acquisition of language.” (Gillian Lazar, 1993:17) Lazar urges that such an approach will be extremely helpful in stimulating students’ imagination, in developing their critical thinking and in enhancing their emotional response.

A significant number of researchers and literature teachers consider that a literary text though accompanied by a short film or not, can be fully understood if the students have some knowledge of the social, economic and political background of the period in which the text is

set. In this view, Carter and Long argue that: “It certainly helps to know more about the forces which influenced that society, and though these may be portrayed in the works themselves, it will be by hints, references and increments, rather than as a concise description.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 134)

Carter and Long reveal the importance of having some previous knowledge regarding the socio-cultural background of a certain novel: While it is possible to read these texts without background knowledge, it seems certain that it would be an ‘incomplete’ reading.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 153)

Additionally, Gillian Lazar claims that students will get to know the culture of the people whose language they are studying by reading literature: “It can be argued that reading literature in English does encourage students to become broadly aware of the social, political and historical events which form the background to a particular play or novel.”(Gillian Lazar, 1993:17) Therefore, Gillian underlines the fact that literature provides the appropriate context for the acquisition of a new language and culture.

However, nowadays literature is undergoing an extensive reconsideration but even at present, when it comes to teaching literature, the teacher-centred and the traditional approaches are still used to a great extent. For instance, information about the author or the novel is exposed in the traditional way and students may be exposed to a variety of theoretical details and to a massive process of explanation in very few minutes. This approach will not encourage students to share their own opinions or to use the target language. The aim should be to add some stimulating activities to these conventional approaches and to vary the class activities in order to encourage students to read and to express ideas.

Therefore, **one approach to teaching literature is to raise students’ interest and to involve them through student centred activities.** Some activities that stimulate interest are mentioned in one of the chapters below: role play, debate, improvising, creative writing, advertisements and many others. The main aim of these activities is to develop students’ wish to read literature but also to improve their language skills. Through all these activities students will try to imagine themselves in the target situation while enjoying the task.

Furthermore, the student-centred activities would involve pair work and group work because in this way learners’ confidence will be enhanced. They will feel at ease to express their own feelings and to offer their own interpretation within a group. As a result, they will become more involved in the activities and they will extend their knowledge by personally reading the text at home.

As mentioned above, for many years, reading a novel or passages from the novel was the only method when it came to teaching literature. However, it has been revealed that the target literary texts are rarely entirely read. Even in the literature classes, due to lack of time, teachers select only some chapters or main topics to discuss. In recent time, due to technology, methodology and teaching techniques have changed in order to encourage the development of a wider range of skills.

Bassnett, for instance, considers “that literature should be part of a complete language learning experience” and the approach to literature that she suggests: “places understanding texts ahead of seeing the learner as a resource and working from that learner’s store of experience and intuitive poetic awareness.” (Susan Bassnett, Peter Grundy, 1995:1) She also continues saying that the teaching of literature should be learner-centred and should encourage originality and creativity.

Consequently, **another approach** to teaching literature would be **to supplement the novel with short movie segments** adapted from the printed text. Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater claim that: “By itself, the printed page can be a fairly cold, distancing medium appealing to a restricted part of the reader’s visual sense and to the intellect.” (Joanne Collie, Stephen Slater, 1987:10) One of the main principles of this approach is that through film adaptations students are exposed to the target language. These short movie segments may focus on the book’s highlights. For instance, a teacher can play a scene which includes the climax or a turning point in the story. Thus, the students can make more meaningful connections between the novel and the film.

The above mentioned approach can be extremely effective as short film segments can become a valuable tool in engaging students in the study of literature and in enhancing comprehension. For instance, the philosopher Andrew Light (2003) argues the importance of using films in academic context: “Films do not merely represent individuals and groups but also help to actually create understandings of who we think we are and how we regard others.” (Andrew Light, 2003: 8-9)

Vetrie reveals that the most effective approach is based on engaging students in activities: “when the students are caught up in a film, they are more successful with their writing and discussion prompts.” (Michael Vetrie, 2004: 44)

Starting from the above mentioned approach, two more approaches can be revealed: focusing only on the film as an artistic genre, independent from the study of literature or focusing on film adaptations from the literary works studied in the EFL classes. The approach suggested in this paper would be **to use short film segments connected to the literary works** being studied in order to enhance students’ understanding of the central topics or symbols that are going to be analyzed.

Stylistics is another approach used in the study of literature and has as a main aim to facilitate the interpretation of the text itself and to develop students’ knowledge of the language. Carter and Long explain this approach in the following way: “One outcome of stylistic analysis is to be able to explore the relationship between what is said and how it is said. It is clearly an approach which is suited to both the study of literature and advanced students.” (Ronald Carter and Michael N. Long, 1997: 121)

Similarly, Lazar provides his own definition of this approach: “Stylistics involves the close study of the linguistic features of a text in order to arrive at an understanding of how the meanings of the text are transmitted.” (Gillian Lazar, 1993:27) According to Lazar the main

aim of this approach is to enable students to interpret the text in a meaningful way and to enhance language knowledge.

For instance, stylistic analysis can provide a way of comparing a literary text to its film adaptation. Students will be able to note the differences and to analyse the reason for these differences.

Therefore, the stylistic analysis develops awareness towards the language use, enhances the emotional response towards the literary styles and encourages confidence in reading and interpreting the literary text.

In the light of this study, it becomes obvious that film segments, used as a supplementary material to the novel, have multiple benefits. They stimulate interest into the literary works being studied in class and they enhance learners' understanding of the central topics of the novels. Using films can prove essential to link the activities done in class with the individual reading. The main reason for this is that films manage to involve the students into the class activities and as a result, out of curiosity or excitement students can read the novel on their own.

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Biodata

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RATE Issues - Winter 2019, issue no. 1, volume 23, ISSN 1844-6159

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