

On Teaching Literature. A General Perspective

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Abstract

The following essay deals with the importance of literature in teaching English as a foreign language. When, and if, used correctly, literature can prove to be an extremely valuable tool in discussing not only aspects related to language and communication, but also topics of more general interest. Very often, literary texts constitute an important resource for tackling linguistic problems (grammar, vocabulary, idioms, collocations, etc.) without neglecting or discarding the cultural perspective entirely. Class work should always focus on student-centred activities prompting an active attitude towards reading, while encouraging learners to express their emotions and feelings.

The study of literature has always been regarded as a very demanding task mainly because it is commonly associated with ‘texts’ that are neither too short nor too simple, but long, difficult to understand (if we take into account the imagery), imbued with ideas, that can be complicated or complex, and the fact that you need, to a certain extent, some special skills, if not talent, to approach literary excerpts. Still, both teachers and students should bear in mind that "there can be no real learning of a language without understanding something of the patterns and values of the culture of which it is part."¹ Undoubtedly, by reading literature, students will expand their cultural horizon and they will deepen their understanding of life. The gain is threefold in fact: they enrich their vocabulary, as literature presupposes a very specific and exciting interplay between literal and figurative meaning, increase social awareness and develop general knowledge as well.

Obviously, literature means different things to different people and its various forms, which comprise not only prose (novels, short stories, fairy-tales, etc.) but also poetry and

¹ Simona Oprescu, *Language and Culture*, în *Speak English*, Editura Coresi, an II, nr. 4/1991, p. 3.

plays, are usually regarded as "valuable authentic material"² which means that "literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues and which is enduring rather than ephemeral."³ And maybe that is the reason why "a literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader from another country or a different period of history."⁴

Through literature, students have the opportunity to read texts that are "genuine and undistorted", during their classroom activities, enhancing their cultural information. Literature has always provided insights into diverse social frameworks, confronting the reader/student with multiple patterns of thought and tradition, expressing universal values and ideologies, significant feelings and ideas. So the main merit of literary works lies especially in their own capacity to develop critical thinking and personal judgment, leading to an independent and autonomous approach. However, one should never forget that literature is first and foremost *fiction*, which implies that it is rarely or almost never mimetic, *id est* a simple reproduction of reality, but rather an attempt to view the world in a more imaginative way.

Although literature could be described as a human creation based on a "set of conventions which govern organization and expression and which help guide our reading"⁵, it is certainly an artifact which assumes that fantasy can help us explore human behavior and consciousness more effectively. Imagination and fantasy make the entire phenomenon even more elusive, ambivalent and hard to decipher/explain, requiring sometimes on the part of the reader/student not only a good mastery of the language, with its double level of meaning – denotation and connotation, but also intuition and a propensity to display fine analytical skills in order to find out any hidden meanings, correspondences and messages.

To define literature is next to impossible since it is the most personal way of dealing intellectually with reality. Nevertheless, some interesting and thought-provoking definitions are available and they belong to: Ezra Pound – "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree;" Iris Murdoch – "Literature could be said to be a sort of

² Joanne Collie/Stephen Slater, *Literature in the Language Classroom*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.3.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Jack Rathbun/Liviu Cotrău, *English Practical Course – Two Approaches To Literature*, EDP, București, 1983, p.7.

disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions;" Roland Barthes – "Literature is the question minus the answer" and Aristotle who views literary creation as something which has "a beginning a middle and an end"⁶ meaning "the arrangements of incidents".⁷

By studying literary texts, learners get the chance to explore other levels of linguistic communication, encountering samples of imagery which invite them to go beneath the surface of the text and unveil any traces of symbolism or allegory. Thus, "language enrichment is one benefit often sought through literature," students being "exposed to many functions of the written language,"⁸ despite the belief that there is a high degree of formality/artificiality attached to it.⁹

Though very important, even essential, language is only one aspect of teaching literature. Beside any linguistic or cultural focus, there is always a type of personal response or emotional reaction on the part of the student: "above all, literature can be helpful in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters in readers."¹⁰ And from here one understands that "engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system."¹¹

Students are prompted and motivated to tackle literary texts because they can teach them something about the world and about their personality. They enlarge their perspective by managing to achieve experience and understanding. Literature holds a special fascination which enables the reader/student to be absorbed into a totally different universe but only to come back as a more accomplished person. The fact that "fiction summons the whole person into its own world"¹² emphasizes the idea that quite often the reader is immersed into the story, sharing in a very intimate way the intricacies of the events that are related. Actually, he becomes part of them, opening up to new dimensions of perception by trying to apprehend the layers of deeper meaning encapsulated in metaphors, similes, oxymorons, and so on. In this case, the comprehension and analysis of a literary text go beyond the language system

⁶ Apud Gillian Lazar, *Literature and Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 1-2.

⁷ Ștefan Avădanei, *Introduction To Poetics*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2002, p. 47.

⁸ Joanne Collie/Stephen Slater, *Literature in the Language Classroom*, p. 4.

⁹ "It is sometimes objected that literature does not give learners the kind of vocabulary they really need. It may be 'authentic' in the sense already mentioned, but the language of literary works is on the whole, not typical of the language of daily life, nor is it like the language used in learners' textbooks." (Ibidem).

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 5.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, p. 6.

transforming themselves into an adventure, an attempt to discover the intention, the purpose, the significance, the efficiency of the actions, things and beings that fill the pages of a book.

Teaching literature relies on involving the student in a process of decoding language in order to establish a new relationship between him/her and the surrounding world. Literary texts hopefully do not separate or isolate us from the familiar reality, on the contrary, they help us build a more fruitful connection with it by achieving a synthesis between the general and the particular, based on a kind of special awareness.

In fact, the writer and the reader create meaning through a subtle process of re-discovering and re-inventing things. "Negotiating the meaning" shows that there is hardly a unilateral analysis – one single established opinion – as literature, more than any other artistic form, requires a personal approach and a very subjective attitude towards content and message:

"Literary critics have come closer than linguists to an understanding of the communicative function of language and the ways in which discourse is made. Their approach to language acknowledges at least that meanings in discourse are to be worked out by active interpretation and are not a simple function of correlation, but this interesting ability depends on more than just a knowledge of pre-formulated rules. It stresses the elusiveness of exact meaning, the creative aspect of interpretation, the importance of involvement."¹³

In other words, meaning is not given, it is something that we have to create permanently, to construct. So, literature is a unique opportunity to explore the profound nature of meaning. Moreover, learners understand the difference between the Illocutionary and Perlocutionary effect of a speech act, between what is intended by the speaker and what is understood by the receiver. Students depart from '*referential meaning*', consisting in '*basic facts*', to get to a more sophisticated and complex use of the words and notions and they learn how to find '*connotational meaning*', in order to detect the intrinsic coherence of the text and its message.

Literature, and especially poetry, helps students become acquainted with the '*deviant*' features of language which are in fact personal and creative interpretations of well known linguistic rules.¹⁴ Besides, "poems offer a rich and varied repertoire and are a source of much

¹³ Michael Lewis, *The Lexical Approach*, Commercial Colour Press, London, 1993, p. 87.

¹⁴ "Poetry reorganizes syntax, invents its own vocabulary, freely mixes register and creates its own punctuation. Poetry draws creatively on a full range of archaisms and dialects and generates vivid new metaphors. It patterns sounds and orders rhythms." (Gillian Lazar, *Literature and Language Teaching*, p. 99).

enjoyment."¹⁵ There is also the practical side of the matter: "there is the initial advantage of length – many poems are well-suited to a single classroom lesson."¹⁶ The final aim of employing such texts should always envisage that "reading poetry enables the learner to experience the power of language outside the strait-jacket of more standard written sentence and lexis. In the classroom, using poetry can lead naturally to freer, creative written expression."¹⁷

Poetry, and literature in general, should be used in class so as to encourage students to read more and in this way to develop those skills or qualities that could make them enjoy the pleasure of a literary text, "instead of seeing it as a chore".¹⁸ Teachers should never forget that "students are generally better able to read difficult texts if they work in a co-operative atmosphere and if you help build up their motivation and confidence. What's more, extra student involvement *in* the classes will increase both interest and willingness to work *outside* the classroom."¹⁹

The teacher should therefore concentrate on three types of activities:

1. building the students' interest through some pre-reading or warm-up activities which can vary from showing pictures/asking questions to using theme/key-words or making predictions, etc.;
2. helping the students understand the content of what they read through appropriately designed activities carried out *after* they have read the text;
3. stimulating the learners to discuss their personal reactions and exchange ideas about the text.²⁰

These activities are believed to ensure a better comprehension of the text leading eventually to a correct interpretation and appreciation of it. Gillian Lazar underlines that "when selecting our literary texts we need to reflect on three important matters that show, implicitly three different ways of looking at a piece of literature:

1. Literature as content
2. Literature as a source of language acquisition
3. Literature for personal enrichment."²¹

¹⁵ Joanne Collie/Stephen Slater, *Literature in the Language Classroom*, p. 226.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Roger Gower/Margaret Pearson, *Reading Literature*, Longman, 1993.

¹⁹ Ibidem (*General Introduction to the teacher*).

²⁰ Ibidem.

The main objective when dealing with literary texts is to devise activities that promote learning "by involving as many of the students' faculties as possible."²² Deconstructing literary passages is not easy, but could be extremely rewarding from an intellectual point of view, adding to the linguistic knowledge a more personal and experienced outlook of the world. The study of literature is not only about language acquisition, involving primarily language-based approaches. It is or it should be a journey into the universe of imagination and fantasy that is so close to the borders of wisdom.

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Biodata

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²¹ Gillian Lazar, p. 14.

²² Joanne Collie/Stephen Slater, p.8. The authors also point out that "tasks and exercises based on a literary text can provide valuable practice in listening, speaking or writing, as well as improving reading skills." (Ibidem, p. 36).