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## READING EFL LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW.

### Abstract

As non-native speakers of English our students have been exposed to the English foreign language (EFL) for more than five years including Middle and Secondary education. During most of that time, they have been busy learning the technique of the language with a special focus on grammar and the mechanics of the main skills of speaking, reading and writing it. We now want them “to reach out a little further and enjoy the wider thoughts and the emotional pleasures available in the recorded thoughts and experiences of others. To make a choice is very difficult. We know that there are hundreds of famous names in English literature. We feel that we and our pupils ought to know something about them and of what they wrote.” (Frisby, 1957:318). Such want is only to be achieved through explicit exposure to EFL literature in the classroom and the extensive reading of diverse literary works.

With many conflicting theories around and various factors to consider, reading EFL literature can be a daunting task. Thus, *How do both teachers and students start on this rather bewildering task? What will be the focus of the reading course? How will teachers react to students' misinterpretations of what they read? and to what extent will students' be engaged in reading the foreign language literature? How can teachers stimulate students' interest and curiosity to read the foreign language literature?* These are some questions that the majority of EFL teachers as well as students ask themselves before, and mainly during reading. They represent the issues that the present paper seeks to address.

### Key Words:

EFL literature – reading – classroom –Teacher -Student.

## **1- Introduction**

As put by Frisby (1957), English is to be regarded as the vehicle for the teaching of the humanities. For him: “when we talk about "humanities" we are talking about man and his culture.”(Frisby, 1957:318). He added that the language in which we study it is an incidental- and we naturally think that literature in English is not only a good vehicle in which to study man, but also worth while for its own sake. So, what is literature? How is EFL literature introduced in our classes? and what parameters are to be considered in reading EFL literature both intensively and extensively?

## **2- Historical Background**

Language and literature constitute one universe (Lado, 1964) and cannot be separated from each other. In this respect, it is widely argued among researchers (Durant, 1993, 158-60; Bruschi, 1989, 9-17) that the relationship between literature and language learning has undergone significant changes.

So far language teachers tried hard to bring the outside world into their classrooms (Wilkins, 1976). Literature at that time was taught as a body of knowledge rather than an integral component of language learning (Delanoy, 1997). The grammar-translation method was regarded as a preparation for the study of literary works (Kelly, 1969). Therefore, the use of literature was indispensable mainly to teach grammar of the foreign language. The 1970's and 1980's brought new implementations in language learning and saw a different language-learning trend (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). Literary texts were not only used for grammar-oriented and dictionary-referenced learning practices but further as a source of imaginative, interactive and discussion activities (Collie and Slater, 1987; Duff and Maley, 1990; McRae, 1991). Communicative language learning as a new approach had stressed the need for language learning sources which the learners can experience as emotionally engaging and intellectually stimulating (the introductory chapters in Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Widdowson 1975).

Such approach enhanced the usefulness of literary texts in stimulating language-learning activities (Duff and Maley, 1990). It also encouraged students to develop proficiency in the use of the target language by providing them with an emotional involvement with the target language (McRae, 1991).

### **3- The Importance of Literature in the EFL Classroom**

Before speaking about the status of the English foreign language literature in the EFL classroom it is of importance to answer the question: what literature is? The question as stated by Sivasubramaniam (2006) alerts us to the problem the term literature raises. Macmillan English dictionary defines literature as: "Literature (noun): stories, poems, and plays, especially those that are considered to have value as art and not just entertainment". (Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2003).

As put by Lado (1964) "The chief aim in teaching foreign language literature should be to teach appreciation of the foreign language literature itself, i.e., capacity to experience it fully. This should also increase the students' appreciation of their own literatures" (Lado, 1964:154-155).

The heritage of English literature as the literature of the English is often judged to be the vehicle whereby a standard international version of the language is established in its dominant role (Cox, 1991; West, 1994). Langer (1997) points out that literature can open "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore". (Langer, 1997:607).

It is assumed among researchers (Carter and Long, 1991; Collie and Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993), that using literature in the classroom strengthens and promotes motivation. In this way literature aids students to expand "their linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge and sensitivity." (Shanahan, 1997:165). Nonetheless, integrating literature in the curricula adds a new dimension to the teaching of EFL. It mainly: "expose students to a wide variety of styles and genres." (Fitzgerald, 1993:643). For example, Erkaya (2005) argued that short stories help students to learn the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories. Lin (2004) also proves that through reading stories, students not only get involved when they are reading, but also link their personal experiences to the contents, which are

positive to their reading development. In addition, and when providing interesting contexts for students to generate input, negotiate meaning and develop motivation, literature can become an efficient vehicle for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985).

According to Clandfield (2004), there are many good reasons for using literature in the classroom. Some of them are summarized in what follows:

- a-** Literature is authentic material.
- b-** Literature encourages interaction.
- c-** Literature expands language awareness.
- d-** Literature educates the whole person.
- e-** Literature is motivating.

In the same token, Collie and Slater (1987), stress the importance of introducing literature in the EFL classroom. For them: “Engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system. When a novel, play or short story is explored over a period of time, the result is that the reader begins to inhabit the text. He or she is drawn into the book. Pinpointing individual words or phrases may make them less important than pursuing the development of the story.” (Collie and Slater, 1987: 5-6). It is indeed in literature that “the resources of the language are most fully and skilfully used.” (Sage, 1987:6).

For successful introduction of EFL literature in the classroom and elimination of false perceptions and negative interpretations of the foreign language literary works by students, one should as argued by Halliday (1964) “ensure that no student is pushed into literary work until he has sufficient linguistic ability to understand, enjoy and appreciate the literary texts that he will be studying, and that above all no student who wishes to extend his practical ability to use English should be forced into accepting a kind of "conditional sale" in which he can only continue in English if his studies are of literary nature.” (Halliday, 1964: 184-185).

If EFL literature is so important to foster students' interest in learning the foreign language, How can the teacher deal with it in the foreign language classroom? and What roles should he play to accomplish such a task?

#### **4- EFL Literature and the Language Teacher**

To a great many teachers of English (both in Britain and abroad), “the teaching of English still means the teaching of English literature.” (Halliday, 1964:183).

The English teacher according to Frisby (1957) teaches a craft but he also initiates into a mystery. The good teacher of literature, for him, must have not merely knowledge, but a sensitive appreciation of the art he communicates. He states that : “The teacher of English is not only an instructor in an honourable craft, the writing and reading of work-manlike prose, he is also something of a magician with the key in his hands to an art which is more universal than music and which is nourished and not vitiated by cheap mass production.” (Frisby, 1957:320).

Delanoy (1996) and with reference to his own experience in teaching literature claims that “getting from a first interest to actual involvement in a literary text can be a demanding step”. (Delanoy, 1996, 82-83).

Yet in many cases “it is painfully clear that there are many among those teachers whose command of English as a language is not sufficient to enable them either to discuss and teach great works of literature or fully to understand or appreciate them.” (Halliday, 1964:184).

Carter and Long (1991) stress how the successful teacher will make students love literature for the rest of their lives, rather than just equipping them for the next examination paper. In this way the language teacher has as a major task to create interest in literature/in a literary text, facilitate entry into literary texts, safeguard involvement in literary texts, safeguard the interests of literary texts, encourage a self-critical attitude to text-reception, and sensitize students to the language of literature (Delanoy, 1997).

To facilitate the teaching task of the EFL teacher, there have been different models suggested on the teaching of literature to ESL/EFL students (Carter & Long 1991, and Lazar 1993). These models

are: the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model (Clandfield, 2004). What is needed according to Savvidou (1996) is an approach to teaching literature in the EFL classroom which attempts to integrate these elements in a way that makes literature accessible to learners and beneficial for their linguistic development.

In fact, the end of the teaching of literature “is not primarily the amassing of knowledge about books and plays and poems, but the acquisition and development of an attitude towards the reading of books and the values that literature has to offer.”(Frisby, 1957:320).

We can only achieve such aims in our EFL classrooms when we succeed to involve our students in active reading of literary texts so that they get pleasure from what they read.

## **5- EFL Literature and the Reading Act**

Reading literature has great benefits on EFL students' achievements as Langer (1997) states: “because it taps what they know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy.”(Langer, 1997:607).

Davis (1992) suggests that the understanding of a literary text read in a foreign language consists of at least four components. First, it signifies the successful decoding of the literal meaning of single words and words combined into sentences. Second, the reading of much literature requires an awareness of historical-cultural referents in which a work was written. Third, literary competence which consists of knowledge of a set of conventions for reading literature. Fourth, understanding literature entails the reader's unique reaction and re-construction of the text.

What is more, “The interactions with the literary text provide “a living through not simply knowledge about.”(Rosenblatt, 1995:38) the world and the experiences of human beings in it (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). Reading literary texts can be especially valuable in generating intellectual growth and an understanding of how experiences of people in the past and present can be represented (Cox, 1991; West, 1994).

As students respond to literary texts, they begin to realize how meaning as an outcome of response can open up contexts for imaginative use of language (Collie and Slater, 1987; Gibbs,

1994). In this context Alderson (2000) assumes that when being involved in the reading act “Not only is the reader looking at printing, deciphering in some sense the marks on the page, “deciding” what they mean and how they relate to each other. The reader is presumably also thinking about what he is reading: what it means to him, how it relates to other things he has read, to things he knows, to what he expects to come next in texts.”(Alderson, 2000:03).

Moreover, Krashen (1985) advocates that using one extended text, such as a novel or a short story, can help students develop familiarity with a particular literacy style and later unknowingly promote their literacy development. In addition, EFL students' contact with literary works will expose them to “the richness and variety of the language they are trying to master.” (Collie and Slater, 1987:5).

Unquestionably and with reinforced exposure to the EFL literature in the classroom, students should be “encouraged to read extensively and in this way to build up their knowledge of the language and its culturally determined meanings independently of classroom teaching.”(Rivers, 1964:148).

## **6- EFL Literature Reading and Culture**

Apart from offering a distinct literary world which can widen learners' understanding of their own and other cultures, EFL literature can create opportunities for personal expression as well as reinforce learners' knowledge of lexical and grammatical structure (Savvidou, 2006). For Lado (1964), to experience a literary work, it is necessary to understand the language in which it is expressed, the cultural meanings which it contains, and the circumstances surrounding it.

The language teacher therefore must understand the intimate relation between a language and its culture. The students cannot go far into the target language without facing differences in cultural meanings, because the meanings expressed in a language are largely culturally determined. Thus, “One cannot understand a language fully without understanding at least some of the distinct cultural meanings expressed through it.” (Lado, 1964:09).

Kramersch and Ricoeur (1976) see the role of literature as producing discourse and not reproducing the text itself, or the culture it is representing: “the teacher can explain and teach the rhetorical structure, the form and content of the text, but an understanding of the values, intentions, and beliefs embedded in the text can only be achieved through open discussion and negotiation of meanings.” (Kramersch, 1985:357).

Since literature is expressed through language, one cannot understand it unless he “understands the meanings of the culture expressed by the words of the language and unless the values and cultural experience against which the literature is written are also understood.”(Ibid, 151).

## **7- Conclusion**

When inculcating literature in the EFL classroom and encouraging our students to read it and admire the beauty of its content, our ultimate aim should not be “to provide a conducted tour through one or two books a year, although we must ensure that our pupils read a minimum amount. It is to introduce our students to writing which they will enjoy, and which perhaps be the beginnings of a process of life long enjoyment. I presume that you do really think that books can provide this enjoyment and also an insight into the lives, thoughts and experiences of others, and that this insight is something worth having.”(Frisby, 1957:320).



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