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Teaching literature to Algerian EFL Learners: The conscious Raising Method

Introduction

For many university teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), the study of literature is indispensable because it exposes students to meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters. Structuring lessons around the reading of literature introduces a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues, and prose. In addition to developing students' English language skills, teaching literature also appeals to their imagination, develops cultural awareness, and encourages critical thinking about plots, themes, and characters. Most importantly, the activities that one can apply with literature lessons easily conform to the student-centered and interactive tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Unfortunately, many postgraduate EFL teacher-training course designing effective classroom activities. This means that both the students and teachers lose out. Fortunately, there are a variety of resources for instructors to use to improve their classes with the study of literature. This article presents a basic review of approaches to teaching literature.

Stylistic approach

According to Short (1996), stylistics is the direct application of linguistic evidence to interpret and analyze literature, and is a general analytical tool that uses explanations of formal aspects of a poem to discuss meaning; for instance, lexical repetition can be used to strengthen the impact of a word, and the number of turns a certain speaker has in relation to another speaker in a poem indicates his or her relative impact or importance. Because language is the subject and focus of instruction, stylistic analysis strongly represents the EFL instructional perspective. EFL teaching activities in which students analyze poetry stylistically can provide opportunities to explicate the formal features of English—including the levels of phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse—and relate them to an understanding of the poem. Rosenkjar (2006) gives examples of language-centered activities used for poetry teaching in a university

EFL class in Japan, where students do the following:

- highlight complete sentences in a poem with alternating colors
- categorize words from a poem into logical groups
- circle personal pronouns and find a pattern
- underline the main verbs

Buckledee (2002) offers similar activities from a university EFL class in Italy, where students look at a poem and answer questions about verb tenses, possessive adjectives, and singular versus plural forms.

New Criticism Approach

The New Criticism approach to literary analysis appeared in the United States after World War I. According to this theory, meaning is contained solely within the literary text, apart from the effect on the reader or the author's intention, and external elements are disregarded when analyzing the work. The reader's role is to discover the one correct meaning by a close reading and analysis of formal elements such as rhyme, meter, imagery, and theme. According to Thomson (1992), the world of a literary work is self-contained, and readers must exercise total objectivity in interpreting the text. In other words, the social, historical, and political background of the text, as well as the reader's reactions or the author's intention, and external elements are disregarded when analyzing the work. The reader's role is to discover the one correct meaning by a close reading and analysis of formal elements such as rhyme, meter, imagery, and theme. According to Thomson (1992), the world of a literary work is self-contained, and readers must exercise total objectivity in interpreting the text. In other words, the social, historical, and political background of the text, as well as the reader's reactions or knowledge of the author's intention, distract from and are not relevant to the interpretation of the literary work.

The major drawback of New Criticism is that most class activities are dedicated to identifying formal elements and literary devices such as symbolism, metaphors, similes, and irony. This turns the study of literary terms into an end in itself rather than a means to discover the beauty and value of a literary work. This excludes looking at the connection between the text and the reader's experiences and the historical and sociolinguistic influences that become apparent during the reading process (Thomson 1992). Some who criticize the approach feel that readers inevitably relate to aspects of what they are reading and become subjectively involved with the text. In fact, this is why many teachers choose particular texts and communicative teaching methods: to treat reading as a process that requires introducing content; de knowledge of the author's intention, distract from and are not relevant to the interpretation of the literary work.

Structuralism Approach

Structuralism is an approach that gained importance in the 1950s; instead of interpreting a literary text as an individual entity, this approach determines where a literary text fits into a system of frameworks that can be applied to all literature (Dias and Hayhoe 1988). Like New Criticism, Structuralism emphasizes total objectivity in examining literary texts and denies the role of readers' personal responses in analyzing literature. It requires learners to approach literary texts scientifically and to use their knowledge of structures and themes to place the work into a meaningful hierarchical system. According to Culler (1982, 20), Structuralism does not focus on

the aesthetic value of literature, but on the different processes and structures that are “involved in the production of meaning.”

Carter and Long (1991, 183) summarize the criticism of Structuralism when they write that “instead of being concerned with how a literary text renders an author’s experience of life and allows us access to human meanings, the structuralist is only interested in mechanical formal relationship, such as the components of a narrative, and treats the literary text as if it were a scientific object.” This focus on literature as a scientific system rather than as one containing individual and subjective meaning downplays the individual’s role in constructing meaning. However, literature should contribute to students’ personal development, enhance cultural awareness, and develop language skills. Though Structuralism does make literature more accessible than New Criticism by connecting a work to an overall thematic structure, it over-emphasizes the linguistic systems and codes as “the sole determinants of meaning” (Thomson 1992, 15). Structuralism therefore is less relevant for the teaching of literature because the EFL teachers and learners possess inadequate skills and knowledge to approach the text scientifically, which makes the study of the process fruitless and results in a lack of motivation for reading literature.

Some of what is lacking in the Structural approach is reinforced by the reactions from my colleagues, who reflect that the intimate relationship between literature and personal development should lead to:

- an appreciation of the value of literature to their spiritual and emotional lives,
- an interest in exploring literary themes from different countries to compare cultural differences,
- pleasure in understanding the effects of language on a poem’s meanings, and
- enjoyment of the value of literature in enriching life experiences.

Stylistics Approach

The Stylistic approach, which emerged in the late 1970s, analyzes the features of literary language to develop students’ sensitivity to literature. This includes the unconventional structure of literature, especially poetry, where language often is used in a non-grammatical and loose manner. Whether these unconventional structures confuse or enhance a learner’s knowledge of the language is the subject of debate. In this respect one must consider the differences among genres. For example, poetry is often abstract and imaginative, while dialogues in dramas are often very realistic.

In the Stylistic approach, the teacher encourages students to use their linguistic knowledge to make aesthetic judgments and interpretations of the texts. Thus the issue of the role of the reader in the process comes up again. According to Rodger (1983), the language form plays the most important role in deciphering a poem’s significance, while others such as Moody (1983) see the importance of the reader’s background knowledge, along with close attention to language features, as important to interpreting complex texts that are “capable of analysis and commentary from a variety of different points of view” (23).

One useful model of Stylistics is Widdowson’s (1983) comparative approach to teaching literature, in which excerpts from literature are compared to excerpts from other texts, such as news reports, tourist brochures, or advertisements. This technique

illustrates that the language of literature is an independent kind of discourse and teaches students different ways that language can be used. In this way students also build their knowledge of *registers*—the different ways language is used in a particular setting to communicate. Students can compare the registers in a literary work with the registers of non-literary texts, which will help them recognize the differences between literary and non-literary language and the various ways language is used to accomplish things. Students will learn to appreciate the power and versatility of all types of language to express the complete range of human feelings and experiences.

The Stylistic approach is relevant because it clarifies one of the rationales for teaching literature: to highlight the aesthetic value of literature and provide access to the meaning by exploring the language and form of the literary text with a focus on meaning. It has been claimed that the beautiful language of poetry, drama, and fiction are motivating and attractive features and that students appreciate literature more when they can explore the beauty of literary language. For example, when they read the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams, they were very excited to discover how the form of the poem reflects the theme of the poem. They were surprised and joyful to observe that the shape of each stanza illustrates the shape of the wheelbarrow itself, the bumpy sound of each stanza replicates the sound the wheelbarrow makes on the road, and the repetition in the sound of the four stanzas also reflects the repeated sound the wheelbarrow makes on the road. In addition, the fact that there is no capital letter in the poem suggests the way people usually consider a wheelbarrow: an unimportant, humble, and almost meaningless object; but the capital letters in the title shows the opposite: how meaningful, important, and beautiful the wheelbarrow is to the worker’s life in particular and to human life in general. My students found the process of exploring the language style and form of the poem both entertaining and valuable. However, they realized that this analysis was not possible without guidance from the teacher, and they felt they would lack confidence if working alone.

If the Stylistic approach to literature is the only method used in the EFL context, some problems do arise. Challenges include the difficulty of recognizing irony in the literature of a foreign culture (Ramsaran 1983) and language learners’ limited communicative competence in English and lack of experience of and sensitivity to a variety of registers in everyday life contexts (Tregrove 1983). These problems increase in EFL classrooms with limited language resources. In addition, the teacher must be knowledgeable about the terminology of literary devices in order to guide students. This knowledge, however, remains problematic in EFL contexts where teacher training and development in literary methods is often limited. Though it is a great pleasure for learners to simply compare the differences between literary language and non-literary language, teaching stylistics effectively requires an investment in teacher training.

Reader-Response Approach

The principles of the Reader-Response approach include attention to the role of the reader and a process-oriented approach to reading literature. Reader-Response supports activities that encourage students to draw on their personal experiences, opinions, and feelings in their interpretation of literature. Dias and Hayhoe (1988, 15) point out that “it is precisely the role of the reader in the act of reading that has not been sufficiently and properly addressed.” Reader-Response addresses this problem by making the learners “active participant[s] in the learning process” (Davies and Stratton 1984, 3).

The crucial connection between the reader and the text is explained by Rosenblatt’s (1978) theory of literary reading, which describes the *transactional relationship* between a reader and a poem. The events that take place in a literary work occur at a particular time and place, and different readers react to these events in different ways, depending on their unique interests and experiences. Each reader attaches his or her own personal interpretation to a work; thus, a poem is “an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text” and “should not be confused with an object in the sense of an entity existing apart from author or reader” (Rosenblatt 1978, 20–21).

This perspective emphasizes the two-way relationship between texts and readers, a perspective that has much in common with theories of *top-down* reading, where students use their *schemata*—or familiarity with the topic from background knowledge and personal feelings—to help them understand the work and improve their comprehension and interpretation of new information (Price and Driscoll 1997; Schwartz et al. 1998). Because each reader has distinctive experiences and feelings, an author’s idea about a work may be described in a multitude of ways. This is why Wright (1975, 17) objects to “the notion that poems can be pinned down once and for all, paraphrased, translated into some statement which is What the Poem Means, and that this statement is then all you need to understand and appreciate the poem.”

Researchers see that the Reader-Response approach makes an important contribution to learning by demystifying literature and connecting it to individual experience. Researchers and teachers in the field of ESOL support making literature more accessible by activating students’ background knowledge so they can better predict and decode the language and themes of literary texts. The Reader-Response approach is also supported because it takes advantage of the crucial fact that emotional reactions from reading a story, poem, or play can be harnessed for classroom instruction (Bleich 1975). Many teachers agree that activating students’ schemata in reading literature is important and that personalizing the learning experience increases student participation and motivation. In fact, these are core principles of CLT that are known to encourage language learning through student-centered and process-oriented activities. As one example, a teacher described a pre-reading exercise he used before his students read Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee.” He asked the students to think about a time when they lost or had to separate from something or somebody they liked or loved very much, and what their feelings were at that moment. When students read the poem, their pre-reading reflection allowed them to immediately understand its theme, much more so than if the teacher had skipped the reflection and simply begun the class with “Today we study ‘Annabel Lee.’ Turn to page 5!” After the class

analyzed the poem together and conducted follow-up activities, the students teased the teacher by saying: “Ah, your love is your Annabel!”

I also recognize a positive change in my students’ attitudes towards literature when I connect the material with their lives. I see joy sparkling in the students’ eyes, thoughtful reflection in their answers, and interest and curiosity for literature when they come to class, feeling free and relaxed. When I allow students to interpret and respond to literature within the framework of their backgrounds and life experiences, they are empowered to:

- give opinions without the fear of having responses different from the teacher,
- work collaboratively in pairs or groups to debate a topic, and
- read poems aloud and perform scenes from plays, which brings smiles, laughter, and contemplation into the classroom.

I was very impressed when my class performed scenes from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and I saw how carefully they prepared for the scenes, how well they performed—including very long memorized soliloquies—and how involved they were in a performance that deeply moved the audience. For me, this is persuasive evidence that when literature combines with communicative activities, students get involved and are motivated to learn English. After teaching a British literature class, I received feedback that indicated students’ positive attitude towards literature and suggested that they would continue to read English literature in the future (Truong Thi My Van, 2009).

Nevertheless, some problems with the Reader-Response approach have been identified, including:

- Student’s interpretations may deviate greatly from the work, making it problematic for the teacher to respond and evaluate
- Selecting appropriate materials can be problematic because the level of language difficulty and unfamiliar cultural content may prevent students from giving meaningful interpretations.
- The lack of linguistic guidance may hinder students’ ability to understand the language of the text or respond to it
- The students’ culture may make them reluctant to discuss their feelings and reactions openly. Therefore, even though Reader-Response has many advantages for learners, it still presents problems that need to be tackled in actual practice. (Truong Thi My Van, 2009)

Language-Based Approach

Like the Stylistic approach, the Language-Based approach emphasizes awareness of the language of literature, and it is a basic stage for EFL learners. However, this approach facilitates students’ responses and experience with literature, and it is considered more accessible for language learners than the Stylistic approach (Nash 1986; Littlewood 1986; Carter and Long 1991). In addition, the Language-Based approach calls for a variety of language instruction activities, including brainstorming to activate background knowledge and make predictions, rewriting the ends of stories or summarizing plots, cloze procedures to build vocabulary and comprehension, and jigsaw readings to allow students to collaborate with others, form opinions, and

engage in spirited debates. The point is that literature is an excellent vehicle for CLT methods that result in four-skill English language development through interaction, collaboration, peer teaching, and student independence. The teacher's role is not to impose interpretation but to introduce and clarify technical terms, to prepare and offer appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene when necessary to provide prompts or stimuli.

Discussion of the Language-Based approach

The Language-Based approach responds to language students' needs in studying literature: they receive the skills and techniques to facilitate access to texts and develop a sensitivity to different genres so they can enjoy a piece of literature that relates to their lives. Moreover, this approach meets students' needs in learning a language: students communicate in English to improve their language competence; they develop the necessary skills of working in groups; and they become active learners while teachers support and guide them in the learning process. My colleagues agree that the Language-Based approach is motivating because it fulfils students' needs in learning about literature and language. It helps students handle a text, enhances their enjoyment and interest in literature, develops their autonomy, and improves their learning of English.

Conclusion

Students' motivation in the learning process is often determined by their interest in and enthusiasm for the material used in the class, the level of their persistence with the learning tasks, and the level of their concentration and enjoyment (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). This type of involvement is something that cannot be imposed; it must come from the materials and lessons that are implemented in the classroom. I hope this article has shown how teaching literature can develop EFL students' motivation in learning English and that the ideas presented here will facilitate teachers' effective use of literature to improve English instruction