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**Literature in the EFL  
Classroom:  
Making a Comeback?**

by  
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# Literature in the EFL Classroom: Making a Comeback<sup>1</sup>

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II*

## Abstract

In the preface to the Interface Series he edits,<sup>2</sup> Carter writes, 'There are many ways in which the study of language and literature can be combined and many different theoretical, practical and curricular objectives to be realized.'. In fact, a long road had to be followed before this statement could bear the weight it does today. Here, I shall describe three stages in the history of literature in language classes, demonstrate how the language of literature can be a rich ground for language learning, and based on the experience of the Brazilian EFL context, propose future work aiming at expanding the integration of language and literature. This paper brings the discussion to the foreground in order to suggest routes for more solid and appropriate applications of literature in the EFL context.

## 1. The historical context

A complete language learning experience involves exposure to literary texts and the word comeback in the title is a reminder that there was a time when literature was not a stranger to the EFL student. In fact, until the early sixties in Brazil, reading the literature in a foreign language was part of language teaching<sup>3</sup> and the student was expected to translate the text from target to source language or vice-versa. Sometimes there were also books of grammar followed by collections of exercises for students to learn the rules of a standardised norm and flex their linguistic muscles. The main objective of learning a foreign language in those days was to enable the student to read literary texts produced in the target language in order to acquire the foreign culture from the collection of texts canonized by tradition. This objective was based on the belief that by learning English literature the student would become a 'morally better person' (the Arnoldian perspective). The methodology was 19th century grammar-translation: that is, studying grammar and applying this knowledge to the translation and interpretation of texts with the use of a dictionary.<sup>4</sup>

With time, literature gradually lost its prestigious position in the classroom. This stage begins with the expansion of the market, the growth of practical needs and interests, and the dismissal of the Arnoldian perspective. To this effect, Steiner remarks that 'individuals can play Bach well and read Pushkin with insight in the evening while in the morning they carry on with their jobs at Auschwitz and in the police cellars' (1968, 1972, p. 45).

This second stage was also influenced by the shrinking of distances. As

the world became smaller and faster with developments in communication, the need of an international *lingua franca* was evident. English, the language spoken by the dominant economic community, gradually won this status.

In the areas of Brazil where English was taught, North American ideology, pronunciation, vocabulary, and songs began to be assimilated, together with jeans, hamburgers, hotdogs, and chewing-gum.<sup>5</sup> After World War II American Literature had started competing with British Literature for space in the university syllabus and many visiting American professors were sent down across the Rio Grande. Later, with the Vietnam War, there was a significant flux of untrained young people from the Peace Corps who would also teach English language for a living.

If, on the one hand, North American mores and ideology were gaining ground in many parts of the world, on the other hand, traditional British institutions and the ideal of acquiring an RP pronunciation were being challenged from within by the young British generation. Communities who spoke different varieties of English (including those outside England) also began to be taken into account. These changes reflected in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language all over the world. Rather than speak 'properly', the goal was now to communicate.

This shift of interests from the quasi-missionary objective of spreading specific cultural values to objectives with more immediate economic advantages affected the teaching of literature. With the emphasis on spoken language many distrusted literature because they saw the written text as language in a crystallized form (cf. Collie & Slater, 1987, 1988, 2).

In this communicative context, literary texts lost their purpose and were regarded as too conservative or too complicated. The English language started to be viewed in terms of a commercial metaphor, a commodity to be packaged, marketed, and sold. Independent language courses were created and many became commercial successes. The book industry thrived. It went into multimedia, incorporating cassettes, slides, videos, etc. to course materials. Shiny and expensive brochures from publishers advertised the new books in the market.<sup>6</sup> Textbooks were made more palatable and attractive, resulting in a higher cost of production. Written in those centres far from the context where they would be used, textbooks targeted wide distribution. Apple details how this situation has affected materials writing. According to him, textbooks

...sell better if they are structured and designed in a way that they demand no preparation on the part of the teacher; if they have as few truly open-ended items as possible so that teachers and pupils can always provide the 'right' answer; if the activities therein are not too intellectually demanding for pupils; if the material presented is not based on the experiences of a nationally identifiable group of pupils..., if they include as much material as possible -- illustrations and texts -- that draws

from the youth pop culture making it attractive to the masses.

(in Dendrinis, 1992, p. 35)

The market exerted a lot of pressure. To sell more widely and make profit, materials writers envisaged a homogeneous audience, having little or no consideration to local needs.

Objectives in the teaching of EFL in many places around the world shifted: the myth that those who mastered English would become better persons was replaced by the myth of access to a promised land of better jobs and consequent social and economic promotion. These were dark times for literature. The ambiguity and polysemy which are part of the nature of literary texts had no place here. Literature was banned from the EFL classroom.

The production and marketing of books continues to thrive today but since the eighties there has been a gradual change in some language experts' attitudes towards literature. Investments were made on books which worked on the interface between language and literature. By then not only had literary texts been demythologized by theoretical poststructuralist studies which saw them as ideological constructs, but linguists had also been claiming that the language of literary texts was not much different from the language of everyday communication. The argument was that literary texts were amenable to the same analytical tools used for the language of ads, of political speeches, or editorials (cf. Cook, 1992; Fowler, 1986; Carter & Nash, 1983).

This change coincides with the fact that the teaching of literature had already been undergoing reappraisals at least since the advent of New Stylistics. At the Indiana Conference of 1958 Jakobson had made reference to the necessity of an integration between literature and linguistics when he postulated that 'a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unacquainted with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronisms' (Sebeok, 1960). In literary studies attention started to be given to the making of the text, to how language was being made to mean rather than on what ideas texts conveyed. These tendencies were institutionalized in England where universities began offering courses on stylistics and on the integration of language and literature. The main centres were Lancaster, Strathclyde, Nottingham and, to some extent, London. These new developments point towards the third stage in the history of literature in language classrooms.

Interestingly enough, this new attitude towards the teaching of literature began to find support in the same language teaching approaches which had once banned it. Coming after structurally-based methodologies, and their emphasis on the correct production of the target form, the communicative approaches

privileged the exchange of meaning, of internalizing the rituals of social relations. From this perspective, the representational nature of literary texts came to be regarded as a rich potential learning area where social patterns of interaction could be experienced in contextualised situations. In addition, people started to realize that literary texts could help develop a kind of buffer area, that is, an area of tolerance to frustration, where readers could wait patiently until meaning was teased out. They realized the potential of the literary texts in exercising this capacity of tolerating indecision.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, language teachers with little or no experience in literature were encouraged to work with literary texts.

In 1990 Duff and Maley wrote in the introduction to their book *Literature*:

In the last five years or so there has been a remarkable rival of interest in literature as one of the resource available for language learning. This book is an attempt to explore further the use of literary texts and language teaching resources rather than as object of literary study as such. For, if indeed literature is back, it is back wearing different clothes.

Indeed, literature is back but it is not wearing new clothes; it is we who are wearing new spectacles.

## 2. Why use literary texts?

The arguments for the use of literary texts in the language classroom are many. As EFL interests shift from learning **how to say** into learning how **to mean**, some scholars like Enkvist issue statements that 'to "know" a language you must cope not only with menus, laundry lists and telephone books, but also with novels, plays and sonnets. Literature is part of language, in more senses than one. And unless you know something of the literature of a language, you do not really "know" the language' (MacCabe, 1985, p. 47). Moreover, as Widdowson points out, 'in literature we find not *reference* to reality conventionally conceived but *representation* of alternative constructs of reality, not actual but possible worlds ... [which] have to be realized through the language which creates them' (1990, pp. 177-78).

Literary texts are intellectually stimulating. They allow readers to create worlds with which they may not be familiar and the way they do it is by relying on language. In building meaning, the reader reconstructs or re-creates what he or she thinks the writer is trying to communicate. In this sense, the reader becomes a performer, an actor in a communicative event. Among other things, the reader must trace the voice of the 'speaker'.

For the sake of illustration, let us examine the opening of two books:

**Example 1:**

'Young school leavers in Britain sometimes leave home to live elsewhere.'

(Barr, 1981, p. 27)

**Example 2:**

'Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.'

(Woolf, 1925, p.11)

Example 1 is a general statement. Very little imagination is required to build this world picture. The repetition *leave/leavers* is predictable and too explicit. The alliteration with *live* produces an echo which makes the repetition even more redundant. In addition, although it is true that readers may not share exactly the same notion of *home* or *school*, any reader with an idea of the function of these institutions is able to arrive at the same meaning. This statement is adaptable to a wide range of readers. To this purpose, a hedge (*sometimes*) and a vague adverb (*elsewhere*) are also used. The narrator's voice is authoritative and targets a mass audience. The reader is not asked to question but to accept this statement as true.

Example 2, however, is intriguing and invites the reader to solve a kind of puzzle. The narrator reports someone else's words but does not necessarily vouch for them. Who is Mrs. Dalloway? What is in her name? Why did she have to say she would buy the flowers? To whom did she say it? Which flowers are these that are introduced by the definite article which implies the writer wants us to assume we already know about them? Would she not buy them if she didn't do it herself?. Why is she buying them? This opening prompts many questions and allows the unfolding of many possible developments.

What we are actually dealing with here is with the inexplicitness of literary texts and the explicitness of textbooks. Warren (1993) states that one of the reasons why language learners carry out unnatural conversation stems from the fact that they are always taught to be explicit. Much of natural language is assumed. One of the things that a literary text is not is being explicit. When it is explicit, there are reasons which justify that.

It may be argued that the examples above differ because they serve different purposes. Example 1 comes from a textbook for practicing reading, whereas Example 2 belongs to a literary work. However, my intention is to show how texts similar to Example 2 can be used in language classes.

Let us consider another example:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.  
(Ezra Pound, 'In a Station of the  
Métro', 1916)

are they set in a comparison? What about the meaning which is created from placing *Métro*, a product of industrialization, and *bough*, a product of nature, in near vicinity? How is the typicality of *A Station* combined with the particularity of this poet's vision? There are many more questions which may be asked of this short piece without having to refer to the fact that it is an example of Imagism, that it was written by Ezra Pound, or that it came as a reaction to Romantic manifestations. The examination of the language of the poem<sup>8</sup> enables the reader to experience events similar to those which have taken place in the poet's mind. In the course of searching for intelligibility and working through language, the reader performs an act of the imagination. This poem stands as an illustration that words do not mean in isolation, that 'the complete meaning of a word is always contextual'(Firth, J., 1935, 1958, p.7).

However, even if we agree that the language used for literary purposes is much more exciting than the one used in some reading textbooks, there has not been (and I believe there can never be) general agreement about which texts to use and how to do it. These decisions depend on the objectives and aims of each course. The socio-cultural context of the learner must be taken into account. In addition, the course generally depends on the approval of an institution which must also be approved by the dominant sector of the society.

Literature is taught in many different situations around the world. Methodology and syllabus selection assume different criteria depending on the context. For instance, Chinese students expect teachers to lecture and are less participating than Latin students. Texts which use Christian references are banned from some Malayan schools even if their theme is not doctrinary. In Brazil, we lived through a period in the 1970s when students' participation was restricted and when political images, themes, or discussions were forbidden. Therefore, questions such as methodology or syllabus should be decided locally.

By now we can claim that the teaching of literature in language classrooms is a fast-growing phenomenon, although many language teachers are still reluctant to work with literary texts.

### **3. Models for the teaching of literary texts.**

Carter & Long (1991) describe three major tendencies in

the use of literature in language classes, where this practice exists. They are the cultural, the language, and the personal growth models, which are not mutually exclusive.

The cultural model is based on the notion that literature is both the expression of socio-cultural attitudes and aspirations of individual societies and, I would add, of mythic and universal values. In this sense, literature is responsible for transmitting the most significant ideas and sentiments of a community. This model privileges the humanistic view of literature and has been generally but associated with teacher-centred approaches where information is imparted by means of lectures. The text here tends to be regarded as a finished product.

From the perspective of the language model, literature is taught for the promotion of vocabulary, structure or language manipulation. This model draws from rhetoric and stylistics those elements which may explain the linguistic choices of an author. In other words, literature is used to 'put students in touch with some of the more subtle and varied creative uses of language' (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 2). This model depends on a more student-centred methodology based on a process-oriented pedagogy. It emphasizes language observation.

The third model aims at students' personal growth, that is, it is more concerned with how students mature as individuals and how they progress through enjoying the experience of reading. It is the 'literature for life' approach. It also works more effectively when oriented towards the learner but, rather than language observation, it promotes individual evaluation and judgement.

In addition to these three models, there could be room for a mixed one: students may look into the language of the text, examine the writer's choices, compare them to other possibilities, check the cultural implications of each choice and evaluate them according to their own cultural model. In this way, students would be working interculturally, bringing to consciousness the ideologies underpinning both the culture which produced the text and the reader's own forms of social behaviour and interaction.

Thus far, this is how the general panorama of teaching literature in EFL classrooms, where applicable, stands day. In Brazil (as in many other countries), we are still in the second stage. Literature remains non-existent in private or public secondary schools. It is still banned from the EFL syllabus. Literature may be dealt with in some private language institutes which may cater for interest groups. When this occurs, the cultural model prevails and literature is approached from the humanist perspective. The objective here is generally to learn about 'the great works of art' aiming at social promotion.

Literature is dealt with in depth in degree courses at institutes of higher education or at some teacher training private language institute. Although extensive reading is required, the tendency is to teach background information and critical theory. Frye's postulation that what is teachable is theory and not literature is followed to rule.<sup>9</sup> Or, as Isenberg words it, the strategy is 'to present a critical study of a literary work and have the students work backwards from the critic's generalisation to the specific evidence in the text' (1990, p. 183).

I will not go into the merits of teaching critical theory, background information, schools of thoughts or literary conventions, all of which belong to the discussion of teaching literature for literary purposes. Here I want to justify why the language of literary texts can be very useful to language learning. It must be made clear that one thing is to aim at literary knowledge and teach literature together with background information and critical theory which will enable students to build up a referential repertoire. This is the aim of literary-oriented classes. Another thing is to use literary texts for sensitizing students to the creative and pleasurable experience of reading and as a springboard to language manipulation, to an experience of alternative worlds and unexpected uses of English. The market today offers a variety of publications which suggest ways of using literary texts. McRae reviews many of them (1990, 432-37 ff).

#### 4. Major points of resistance.

If the most common oppositions to the teaching of literature in language classrooms are considered, we might find further support to our case. Based on Lazar's (1993) research, I will discuss some of them:

- *I've got a very demanding syllabus to get through, so there's no real time for playing around with poetry in my lessons.*

Time is a question of priority. Therefore literature here is not relevant. This argument shows clearly the teacher's attitude. Literature is an adjunct because the teacher has not realized its full potential. Playing is an adequate word to refer to it, but not *playing around*. I see **playing** as manipulating, creating new forms of expressions, enjoying the experience. What this teacher needs is theoretical support that will reveal how relevant literature can be to language learning.

- *My students don't read poetry in their own language, so how can they possibly read it in English?*

One argument does not necessarily follow the other. Training in native literature is not a requirement for reading works in a foreign language. In fact, some of my Brazilian students have been able to develop a stylistic interpretation in English first and then have tried to apply the

same method to Brazilian and Portuguese poems.

- *It's alright to use poetry with students who intend to study literature further when they leave school. But reading poetry is too specialised an activity for most students, isn't it?*

Any change requires some effort and the teacher should be convinced of the benefits of using literary texts so as to commit himself or herself to the process of change. Reading literature is not *too* specialized but it does require training.

- *I've tried using a poem with students, but they found it difficult to understand  
and just wanted me to give them the 'right' interpretation of what it meant.*

The issue here is not with **what** to teach but **how** to do it. If one approach is not successful, other ways should be tried. These students are used to teacher-centred methodologies in which they expect the teacher to provide the answer. Moreover, they must be exposed to a situation where there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, as in the case of literary texts. In literature what counts is the adequacy of an interpretation.

- *I sometimes wonder if I've really understood the meaning of a poem myself--it's a bit daunting then to explain it to a group of students.*

Teaching literature requires training. Perhaps the teacher has not been sensitized. Meaning is something the reader build<sup>s</sup> in the process of reading. Any interpretation which can find justification in the text is acceptable. Perhaps the teacher is flustered and the text is really too difficult in the sense that the reader lacks enough shared knowledge to make sense. Either the language is too distant (as in metaphysical poetry) or too many extra-textual references are assumed. When this occurs, the text should simply not be brought to class. The teacher can always check how appropriate the text is to his or her students. Then, we come to the question of explaining: as far as literature is concerned, students should be encouraged to see, to find out for themselves. This is the only way different interpretations may be brought to class. The teacher should be flexible enough to accept different interpretations.

- *If poetry's deviant language, what's the point of using it with language learners? They want to know what's right, not what's wrong.*

This statement deals with a complex issue. Two arguments can be built against this statement. The first holds that in order to understand some item as **deviant**, one must concede that there is a system of rules to which one must conform. Whatever deviates from this system of rules is strange, unusual, irregular, etc. If the notion of deviancy is accepted, it may in fact be held against itself: To produce deviant forms, one must know the rules. So, in fact, language learning is

being reinforced. In being conscious of the construction of 'deviant' expressions we are working with limits of the possible along with what is impossible.

The second argument denies the notion of deviancy by sustaining that rule-breaking is not restricted to literary texts. It is an aspect of everyday language. For instance, the following example I picked out from my E-mail on Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1993 shows linguists communicating with each other and not necessarily writing poems. It reads (verbatim):

I have just broken into this inappropriate English discussion, and wonder if anyone has mentioned my favourite example, which was the pretty high-powered sports car marketed in the UK by Mitsubishi under the name 'Starion'. I'm convinced that some Japanese executive must have thought, 'Ah, Starion - velly stlong horse - good name.' This was confirmed by the Chinese husband of a freind, who had one, and was convinced that that was what it meant!

To understand the gist here, allowance must be given to creativity in language. Moreover, how do we account for what is deviant or not? There is an obvious misprint in this text which is not meant as phonological deviance nor does it contribute to the effect of the message.

Other examples can be found in the metaphors of everyday language.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in

You disagree? Okay, shoot!

this doesn't mean you will point a gun at the person. Or in

The ham sandwich is waiting for his check.

where the speaker is actually referring to the person who ordered the sandwich.

Deviancy in language assumes the existence of a stable system. Stubbs (1993) reviews the tradition in British linguistics from Firth to Halliday and Sinclair and shows how current studies in linguistics have been demonstrating the relevance of language variation, where every instance in a text perturbs the overall probabilities of the system. Therefore, the notion of a fixed system is undermined. What linguists now realize is that both instance and system are probabilistic issues.

I would like to stress that the integration of language and literature can work on different levels and for different objectives. At university level, the integration may be very helpful as an

introductory course to literary studies where students are trained to be more independent critics who can arrive at an interpretation in a principled way.<sup>11</sup>

## **5. Conclusion: looking ahead.**

If we want our students to be able to make sense of what is implicit in a foreign language, to experience language in use, to have a deeper understanding of how that language works, and to play on the imaginary level, we should bring literature back into the language classroom. In order to do it in a principled way, work should be developed in at least three areas.

First, on the theoretical level, a rigorous study of the present status of the teaching of literature in the country in question should be carried out. Results should include a mapping of interests in a more precise way and the tracing of the relationship between the aims of teaching literature and the methods used to achieve them. Then, these interests should be checked against those of teaching language to see how and where integration could occur.

Second, teacher-training centres should include programmes to sensitize language teachers to literature. Such programmes would teach them how things are being done with language and how to have students manipulate language to create effective texts. They would concentrate on three areas: on what is taught (the texts); on the way it is taught (the approaches); on the different levels at which it can be taught; and on the reason why it is taught (the purposes and objectives). Besides exercising the trainees' interpretive skills, such programmes would also train them to plan their classes, select texts appropriate to their specific setting, and enable them to approach the literary text from a more theoretically-solid basis. This is the only way to avoid the fallacious assumption that literature entails highly personal, subjective, and uncompromised responses. More than just varying the pace of a language class, of being the icing on the cake, a literary text should be regarded as an instance of aesthetic communication.

Finally, we cannot avoid the commercial influence in language teaching but the publishing houses should take into account the experience of local teachers. Homegrown materials and techniques for classroom application could be developed by local teachers together with researchers and materials writers either as part of the programmes of sensitization or as separate projects. This joint research would bring together the strengths of the three of them -- the experience and contact with reality of school teachers, the theoretical knowledge of the researcher, and the expertise of the materials writer. In this sense, the books

used in the classroom would be more appropriate and could be made less expensive than the publications in the market today.

These are just initial suggestions. They may remain as conjectures until funding is made available. There is much stimulating work ahead. I have put theoretical and empirical perspectives together in the belief that it is through pedagogic practice and application that innovations will take place. McRae (op. cit.) predicts that 'the majority of these new materials originates outside the UK as product of practical teaching and experiment... Perhaps one of the trends of the next few years will be to build upon this practical overseas experience in the selection of new materials for publication.'

Many of the objections raised by language teachers lose their strength when literature is understood as an important manifestation of imagination and creativity, where there is no right or wrong, where human logic is challenged and pushed to limits, where cultures and ideologies are checked and compared, where a language system is not taken for granted. This is why I claim that literary texts are essential to language learning. What is open to discussion is which texts to use and how to handle them. Ultimately what happens in the space and time of a classroom depends on the teacher/student interaction. Therefore, it is up to each individual teacher to help promote the integration between language and literature.

## Notes

1. Acknowledgements are due to Fundação José Bonifácio for computing facilities.
2. Published by Routledge (London & NY).
3. For a historical account of the teaching of literature in England, see Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). *A History of English Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. For the United States, see Graft, G. (1987). *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, . Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
4. On a more comic note, I have heard reports that in some cases teachers would take a text (literary or not - the informant did riot even remember!), read the text aloud, have the students repeat each sentence after it had been uttered by the teacher -- a pointless strategy which at times led students to bark and howl to break the monotony of the exercise. It could mm out to be a very interesting document if non-native teachers of literature in English compiled and recorded their

memories of their first English classes, the title of which could be 'How I Managed to be an English Teacher In Spite of It All.'

5. The second part of Brumfit's (1991:26) remark does not apply to Brazil.

He writes: 'American domination of the world economy reinforced the position of English as the major language of international communication, and Britain was historically better placed than the United States to exploit this demand' ('Language awareness in teacher education' in James, C. & Garrett, P. *Language Awareness in the Classroom*. London, Longman, pp. 24-39).

6. Nowadays, computer technology is also being integrated into language teaching, though still on a small scale in Brazil.

7. Or what John Keats in a letter to George and Thomas Keats (Dec.21, 27(?), 1817, called, '...Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts...'. (in Abrams, M.H. et al (eds.)(1986). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York & London, W.W. Norton & Co., p. 863.)

8. For a more detailed analysis, see Rodger, A. (1983) 'Language for Literature', in Brumfit, C. (ed.), *Teaching Literature Overseas: Language-Based Approaches*, ELT Documents 115, Oxford: Pergamon Press & The British Council, pp. 37-65.

9. See Frye, N. (1957), *Anatomy of Criticism*, London, Penguin, for a perceptive discussion of this issue.

10. Examples taken from Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

11. I carried out a course on Literary Awareness grounded in stylistics at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro as part of my Ph.D thesis (Zyngier, forthcoming). My assumption was that by studying the stylistic patterns which may be made responsible for the effect of the text, students could become sensitized to the aesthetic effects of this text.

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