Why teach literature
in the foreign language classroom?

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Resumen

De vez en cuando, se ha cuestionado la necesidad o el valor de enseñar la literatura en la clase de idiomas. Este artículo repasa y matiza los argumentos a favor y en contra de la enseñanza de la literatura y defiende dicha enseñanza en base a tres argumentos: 1. la literatura puede favorecer el aprendizaje de idomas en la educación primaria puesto que los procesos cognitivos de los niños están especialmente capacitados para tratar estructuras narrativas; 2. la literatura, traducida en su caso al idioma objeto de la enseñanza, puede proporcionar conocimientos y competencias culturales que permitan a los estudiantes desenvolverse adecuadamente en relaciones con representantes de diversas culturas; 3. los temas tratados en la literatura pueden resultar más verosímiles y más relevantes que los temas que se encuentran en los libros de texto.

Palabras clave: literatura, adquisición de lengua, competencia cultural, realidad

Abstract

From time to time the need or value of teaching literature in the language class has been questioned. This article reviews and qualifies the arguments for and against teaching literature before defending such teaching on three grounds: 1. literature can enhance language learning at primary level since the cognitive processes of young learners are particularly adept at dealing with narrative structures; 2. literature written in the target language or translated into the target language may give learners insight into other non-target language cultures, thus preparing them to act competently and appropriately in future dealings with representatives from those cultures; 3. literature's contents may well be truer to life and more relevant to learners than typical textbook topics.

Keywords: literature, language acquisition, cultural competence, real life

1. The case against literature

It is sometimes difficult for teachers and lecturers of literature to justify their professional existence, a difficulty that contributes in part to what literary scholar Elaine Showalter (2002: 1-20) calls "the anxiety of teaching." It is therefore understandable that foreign and second language (for convenience, "FL") teachers and lecturers may sometimes find it even more difficult to justify the inclusion of literature in their lesson plans. Some reasons for this difficulty are political. As far as teaching English as a foreign language is concerned, for example, not only are professionals occasionally afflicted by guilty feelings that they are lackeys in the pay of linguistic imperialism, but if they start introducing their students to Shakespeare, Dickens or Ted Hughes they are condemned for cultural imperialism too (e.g. Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986), not to mention a bigoted reverence for mostly dead white males (see Section 4). Other reasons are methodological. FL teaching should engage with "real life" and "real-life" situations; literature—conceived of as some sort of aesthetic artefact—is not "real life", at times not even realistic, and barely relevant to day-to-day living (see Section 5). Similarly, literature is often remote from learners, whether historically,

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geographically, socially, culturally or linguistically. Meanwhile, under a communicative approach, FL teaching should favour speaking and listening skills, whereas literature is a matter of reading writing, or writing to be read. Also, teaching literature entails an imbalance of power and work in the teacher-student relationship, for the teacher is more knowledgeable and takes a more dominant role in communicating that knowledge, especially when the piece of literature is used less as a means to an end than as an end in itself, less as a resource than an object of study in its own right.

Until recently, a further argument against teaching literature was that new technologies and cultural practices in the high- or post-industrial West had rendered—or were on the point of rendering—reading and writing hopelessly obsolete. Then Harry Potter came along, UK sales of children's literature increased tenfold, and children themselves became increasingly discerning and demanding readers. Literature, it seems, is here to stay, for the time being at least, and particularly in the FL classroom where the global spread of bilingual and immersion education means that pupils are expected to be proficient at reading in a non-native language at ever earlier ages, to the point where in some education systems pupils are even introduced to reading in a second language before they have learnt to read in their first (Johnson and Swain 1997). The question that concerns FL teachers is what to do with literature and, perhaps more importantly, why do anything with it at all. On the occasion of the re-launching of *Encuentro*, this article is intended as a stimulus to reflection, research and debate on the role of literature in FL teaching.

2. The case for literature

A welter of reasons for, or benefits of, teaching literature in the FL classroom have been proffered by a variety of authors. For example, Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000: 9-11) list, with more or less approval, the following ten:

1. Cultural enrichment. Reading literature promotes cultural understanding and awareness. (see also Collie and Slater 1987; Schewe 1998; Sell (ed.) 1995; Silberstein 1994).
2. Linguistic model. Literature provides examples of "good" writing, linguistic diversity, expressive ranges, and so on.
3. Mental training. Better than any other discipline, literature trains the mind and sensibility.
4. Extension of linguistic competence. Literature stretches the competences of learners who have mastered the linguistic rudiments.
5. Authenticity. Literature is genuine linguistic material, not a linguistically contrived textbook (Duff and Maley 1990).
6. Memorability. Because literature, especially poetry and songs, is memorable, it can be a memorised archive of linguistic usage (Maley and Moulding 1985).
7. Rhythmic resource. Poems assist the learner in assimilating the rhythms of a language (Maley and Moulding 1985).
8. Motivating material. Literature is more likely to engage with and motivate a learner than artificial teaching inputs because it is generated by some genuine impulse on the part of the writer and deals with subjects and themes which may be of interest to the learner (Duff and Maley 1990).
9. Open to interpretation. Because literature is open to interpretation, it can serve as a basis for "genuine interaction" between learners (Duff and Maley 1990).
10. Convenience. Literature is a handy (photocopiable) resource.

Lazar (1993:15-9) suggests that literature in the FL classroom motivates, offers access to cultural background, encourages language acquisition, expands language awareness, develops students' interpretative abilities and educates the whole person in so far as it enhances our imaginative and affective capacities (see also Fernández 2003: 60-31). Burke and Brumfit (1986:171-2) state that literature promotes literacy and

oracy, critical and analytical ability, social skills and the use of the imagination; encourages liberal, ethical and humanitarian attitudes, respect for the imagination, respect for literacy and cultural tradition; and provides information about literature, literary traditions and language.

Some of these justifications or benefits are obviously debatable (e.g. literature is supreme at training the mind), others slightly quaint (e.g. poems are memorable), and others tautologous (e.g. literature promotes literacy, provides information about literature, etc.). What is more, even if we concede literature all those benefits, few of them actually have anything to do with FL learning, except perhaps as a side-effect. Not only that, almost any other cultural production may yield similar benefits: wouldn't a pop-song lyric, a small-ad, the list of ingredients on a box of cereals also fit the bill in most cases? In short, we do not seem any closer to finding satisfactory reasons for teaching literature (rather than pop-songs, small ads, jokes, comic strips, etc.) as a useful means to the end of acquiring linguistic and cultural competences. In what follows I shall consider how three benefits may be nuanced in order to constitute sounder grounds on which to defend the teaching of literature in the language classroom.

3. Literature and language acquisition

Parkinson and Reid Thomas's third reason for teaching literature in the FL class, namely that it trains the mind better than any other discipline, has a ring of literary supremacy about it. Training the mind is the benefit traditionally claimed in classical humanist defences of any discipline within the arts or humanities. Parkinson and Reid trace the idea to F.R. Leavis's *Education and the University* (1943), although its lineage goes back a good deal further than that. Despite the idea's élitist feel, it survives in a more respectable form in what has become one of the more scientific defences of literature in the language classroom. In an oft-cited interview, H.G. Widdowson argued that "reading literary discourse can assist students in the development of sense-making procedures of the kind required for the interpretation of or sensitization to language use in any discourse context" (Carter 1988:17-18). Here is an extract from the interview:

If you're a sensible teacher you use every resource that comes to hand. But the difference between conventional discourse and literature is that in conventional discourse you can anticipate, you can take short cuts; when reading a passage, let's say, you often know something about the topic the passage deals with, and you can use that knowledge while reading naturally in order to find out what's going on in the passage. This is a natural reading procedure: we all do it. The amount of information we normally take out of something we read is minimal, actually, because we simply take from the passage what fits the frame of reference we have already established before reading. Now you can't do that with literature . . . because you've got to find the evidence, as it were, which is representative of some new reality. So, with literary discourse the actual *procedures for making sense* are much more in evidence. You've got to employ interpretative procedures in a way which isn't required of you in the normal reading process. If you want to develop these procedural abilities to make sense of discourse, then literature has a place. (Rossner 1983; ctd. Brumfit and Carter 1986: 13-4 and Carter 1988:18).

There are two problems in this passage. In the first place, where would the language of, say, advertising fit in: is it conventional or literary discourse? Certainly, the enigmatic inscrutability not just of language but of other semiotic codes in some TV ads poses significant interpretative challenges. Secondly, despite the apparent ontological dichotomy Widdowson establishes between literature and conventional discourse ("Now you can't do that with literature"), there is a hint in the comparative "much more" that the difference may in fact only be one of degree, not kind ("with literary discourse the actual *procedures for making sense* are much more in evidence"). The procedures Widdowson refers to boil down to one, inferencing, which should now come as no surprise given the current hegemony of what Sperber and Wilson (1995:2), building

on the work of Paul Grice and David Lewis, call the "inferential model" of communication, whereby "communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence."

The most that can be argued in the direction Widdowson would wish to take us is that, by and large, literary texts usually require a greater amount of inferencing than other texts. The significance of that for FL learning is that, purportedly, "Such training in deciphering the [literary] communication, working out the precise nature of its communicative acts, by projecting yourself backwards and forwards, in and outside and across the discourse can be a key element in the acquisition of discoursal skills in the target language (Carter 1988: 18). But I am not sure how fruitful a conclusion that is, especially if such skills are to be honed on gap-fill or cloze exercises—standard textbook fare—which may well dampen the enthusiasm of students for literary texts (though see Van Peer 1988: 281). In any case, it is a conclusion which was really rather obvious in the first place and is, additionally, somewhat tautologous. Suppose, for a moment, that language textbooks are regarded as literature (or, at least, as a sub-species of literature) in so far as they are not composed of real communicative acts, generally lack the feel of the real, and so forth (see below, Section 5). If we apply Widdowson's argument, when using such books students are being trained in inferencing, and inferencing is a useful to skill to use when learning languages. In other words, when using a language textbook to learn a language, one is learning a language. Gosh! I would add that one is also learning a language when poring over the ingredients on a foreign cereal packet or perusing the sports pages of a foreign newspaper. Quite simply, if you do things in or with a foreign language, you are doing things in or with a foreign language. Inferencing isn't exclusive to the interpretation of literature: it's basic to all cognition and we do it (and practice doing it) all the time. To justify teaching literature in the FL classroom on the grounds of its affording some alleged extra scope for inferencing and therefore enhancing language learning ability seems to be stretching things a little too far.

Nonetheless, recent work on FL teaching in early education suggests that literature might yet have a particularly beneficial contribution to make to FL acquisition. Kokkola (2002) has conducted research along these lines among nine- and ten-year old Finnish schoolchildren, basing her study on two theoretical concepts The first is Bruner's (1986) concept of "the narrative mode" of human thought which "leads people, in their search for meaning, to create stories, myths and rituals" (Kokkola 2002: 243). The second is Egan's (e.g. 1988a and 1988b) view of learning as a kind of "mythic thought" whereby "complex ideas [are structured] within the framework of a story" (ibid.). Bruner and Egan are alike in arguing that stories or narratives are one of the most effective ways of structuring ideas and information (see also Fuller 1982). Egan actually suggests that mythic thought is a stage in a child's psychological development and that "stories are one of the earliest forms of organizing schemata" and precede other systems, such as hierarchical organization (ibid. 244). Thus, because young learners are cognitively adept at narrative, Kokkola attempts to test the hypothesis that young language-learners "are likely to get on better with narrative than non-narrative" (ibid.) because narrative texts are better suited to their cognitive processes.

Kokkola's research shows that children actively construct the texts they read and that the narrative text presents them with fewer learning difficulties. "However," as Kokkola herself admits, "it has been possible to explain . . . differences in reading performance in terms of linguistic suitability" (259). Kokkola ascribes this possibility to the choice of text used, and concludes that, if suitable texts are chosen, "only narrative texts should be used in the early stages of EFL reading education" (ibid.). The idea that young learners find narrative texts easier to understand than non-narrative runs completely counter to Widdowson's contention that non-narrative texts are easier to understand than narrative because of the former's exploitation of conventional frameworks, assumptions and expectations. There is clearly scope here for further research, especially by those who would like to see literature preserved as a vital tool for language teaching. Such

research might justify the existence of typical young learner schoolbooks such as *Teddy's Train* or *Bug's World*, whose unconvincing fictions at first sight seem of dubious didactic value, to this parent at least.

4. Literature and cultural competence

In an age when multiculturalism has installed itself as the shibboleth of western societies and the words interculturality and transculturality circulate as buzzwords in academia, it is unsurprising that perhaps the foremost defence of literature teaching in the FL class is that it fosters awareness of cultural, ethnic, religious, racial etc. diversity and sensitises the young to contrasting perspectives, concepts and world.views, such sensitivity being vital to life in community in the global village (see Stotsky 1994 and Naidoo 1999). In practice, the literature used in the English FL class is often English, that is to say written by writers from the metropole, and this has led to the charge of cultural imperialism. The charge can easily be refuted, especially within an education system which promotes learner activity and participation rather than spoonfeeding. Sell (2002a: 19) advocates a "participatory pedagogy, whose overarching aim will be to give language learners a chance to try on the alien culture for size." This does not mean that language learners are expected to forfeit their native identities:

They have to read "like a native", as we sometimes say. This is not at all the same thing as actually "going" native. It is not a suspension of their own identity. On the contrary, their exploratory participation in the target culture may leave them with strong reservations about it. But at least they will understand it better, and will have developed a somewhat more flexible affective competence, which will have improved their chances of getting along with the culture's representatives, and of themselves being able to act within its parameters. It is these benefits which are the basic goals of most foreign language education programmes. (Sell 2002b: 266)

Thus teaching literature provides learners with a truly cultural competence, equipping them with culturally-apposite pragmatic and socio-psychological components around which to build effective identities which will enable their socialization in the target culture and enhance the effectiveness with which they participate in that culture. To use the terminology of social psychologist Erving Goffman (1990), these identities do not replace the learners' selves, but are the culturally effective and palatable identities which the learners may elect to project or present before the target culture.

The problem is, what should the target culture or cultures be? Despite the laudable entry of non-metropolitan literature (i.e. literature from the colonies) into the English FL class, the culture learners are invited to try out (Multicultural British, Commonwealth) will not perhaps be of much use in the imminent future when the economic and political (not to say cultural) hegemony looks certain to switch from the West to the East. The time is not far distant when competence in Chinese or Indian or Islamic culture will be far more necessary than in any other. This raises the question of the relationship between language and culture. The first point to be made is that, *pace* Acton and de Felix (1986), acculturation need not rely on the synergy of language and culture acting in indivisible fusion. Furthermore, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is safely buried—elegantly so by Pinker (57-65).We now know that culture is not linguistically determined, though a culture obviously does have, among numerous other means, language to assist its self-expression; nor is language culturally determined. Indeed, it is perfectly possible for one to be relatively deficient in a target culture's language but, nonetheless, to function pretty well in that culture, and the converse is also true (Brown 1980 and Schmidt 1983; ctd Sell 2002b: 272).

If is therefore wrong, I think, in the case of English FL teaching for teachers to manifest a predilection for, or partiality, to the culture of the target language. It is not necessary for English to be taught solely within one particular cultural frame. It would, perhaps, be more productive to introduce learners to other

cultures through English since these users of English will increasingly be coming into contact not with English culture but with Chinese, Indian or US culture (if such monolithic epithets will be forgiven)—and doing it in English: in other words, the classroom situation of cultural encounter through English would be mimetic of the real-life situation of cultural encounter through English.

Furthermore, the time has come for EFL teachers to recognise that what they are teaching is not British English, or BBC English, or Ivy League US English, not to speak of Liverpuddlian, Glaswegian, Manhattan or Soweto English; and for everyone to recognise that to all effects and purposes there is no such thing as linguistic purity, linguistic normativeness or linguistic deviance, and that the language most non-native speakers of English need (and actually use) is a "stateless" (House 2000) culturally rootless *lingua franca*, itself with myriad regional variations in lexis, accent and dialect (Graddol 1999 and 2001; Seidlhofer 2001a an2001b). The goal of the EFL learner should not be to speak English as the English do, but to be able to use English to communicate with English and non-English alike. Whether the EFL learner has a) read and b) acquired a modicum of British cultural proficiency from Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man" speech, the first chapter of Dickens's David Copperfield or W.H. Auden's "Funeral Blues" (to cite a few examples of token literature appearances in the redoubtable *Headway* series) is really beside the point. One might wonder how many native users of English have read any of those three works, and if not, whether they are therefore culturally handicapped. More to the point, there is a world of cultures elsewhere, several of which are already considerably more influential on the world's stage than English or British culture.

In other words, literature may well raise awareness of other cultures and enhance cultural competences, but it is not only (if at all) English literature that should be studied. English as a foreign language should be treated as an international, functional, largely transactional *langue*, divorced from any culturally specific, socio-pragmatically determined *paroles*. Classical Latin was fossilized for a thousand years and then recovered as the *lingua franca* for Europe's cultural élites in the later middle ages while the vernacular Latins had continued to evolve, transforming themselves into a variety of romance languages, notably, of course, Spanish, Italian and French. In much the same way, International English may—in fact, does— prosper where Esperanto failed, while native, vernacular Englishes the world over go their own way and continue to undergo perpetual modification and cultural energisation.

This, of course, will have consequences for educational programmes. If International English is to be taught as a functional *lingua franca* for international communication, dissociated from any particular culture, then the teaching of exclusively English literature as a part of the subject International English will be unnecessary and untenable. A decision will then have to be taken about how to teach culture, and which cultures to teach. In schools, Culture could be studied as a subject in its own right (replacing Religion, perhaps?), giving children insight into Islamic, Indian, Oriental and Anglo-Saxon cultural frames, systems, practices and customs. Here, certainly, there would be a place for literature, translated either into the pupils' native language or, if it were decided to teach Culture in English for the reasons I suggested above, translated into English. Alternatively, literature could still be integrated into EFL teaching, but literature from a variety of cultures, translated as necessary. As for vernacular Englishes (UK English, US English, etc), they would then become subjects for higher education where language and literature could be studied in tandem, as in fact happens today.

5. Literature and real-life issues

Standard FL textbooks are fictions in a variety of ways. Not only do they tend to peddle a version of English which is abnormal in its normativeness, deviant in its purity, but they also use fictional storylines to introduce learners to various situations, points of grammar or lexical fields and often employ non-authentic

recordings of actors with bogus accents for listening exercises. Apart from being fictive, this is all unconvincing and patronising and turns off the target learners, as any teacher who has laboured through the *Open Roads* photo-stories should know. Equally misguided are textbooks which try to get real by dropping names like Samantha Fox, Frank Bruno or the Spice Girls and instead only risk short-term ridicule from students with conflicting tastes and interests, and mid- to long-term obscurity (Who remembers Fox and Bruno today?). Because literature is unashamedly fictional, it can get away with such cultural references or do without them altogether by creating its own.

Textbook topic contents are also often unreal in the sense of irrelevant to the learners sitting in the classroom. Now, thank goodness, students are no longer taught how to describe, say, the main sites of London but are invited to talk about their own towns and cities, but still much of the content often fails to address the issues that concern learners or are likely to confront them in real-life. To put it bluntly, just as no one ever pissed in Enid Blyton stories, so there is little sex, drugs or rock 'n' roll in FL textbooks, little about human relations, sexual relations, sexual orientation, drugs, alcohol, racism, loneliness, fear, bullying, violence, growing up, dying, etc. etc. This is where literature can step in to fill the gap, supplementing topic areas with material that is authentic and has a chance of engaging learners affectively, more so than other text types. Literary texts carefully chosen in accordance with the social and cultural environment, the level of psychological development, and the interests, concerns and aspirations of learners can, if used wisely, be an effective tool for stimulating and achieving language learning and equipping learners with relevant linguistic and socio-cultural competences.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, I would defend the use of literature in the FL class on the basis of the arguments set out above. Firstly, literature in the target language may enhance language learning at primary level since the cognitive processes of young learners are particularly adept at dealing with narrative structures. Secondly, literature written in the target language or translated into the target language may give learners insight into other cultures, thus preparing them to act competently and appropriately in future dealings with representatives from those culture, where the channel of communication is likely to be English. Thirdly, literature's contents may well be truer to life and more relevant to learners than the typical textbook topics.

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