

LITERATURE IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Alina Nicoleta Ionescu (Pădurean)

Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad

Abstract: Literature has always played and will always play an important role in teaching. A student cannot enhance a foreign language without knowledge of its culture and literature. Although literature is less taught nowadays, its place being taken by authentic materials, teachers should not underestimate its importance and find modern, interactive and challenging ways of teaching it to their students. We have also conducted a quantitative research among students from a high school in Arad to find out their opinion on the importance of literature and the ways they consider interesting to enhance it.

Keywords: literature, authentic material, drama, skimming, skills

Introduction

Literature as teaching technique in the development of linguistic competences is very common nowadays and is used both for the development of basic linguistic competences (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and language skills (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). In translation courses, teachers frequently ask their students to translate literary texts such as drama, poetry and short stories, as they offer students the chance to train and practice their lexical, semantical, pragmatical and stylistic skills.

According to Collie and Slater (1990:3) there are four main reasons that determine teachers to use literature in the classroom. These are: valuable authentic materials, cultural enrichment, linguistic enrichment and personal involvement. Apart from these four reasons, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power are other factors that call for literature use in the classroom.

1. Valuable authentic materials. Most literary pieces of writing are not created for teaching purposes. Many examples of authentic language used in everyday contexts are included in textbooks. We refer to travel diaries, questionnaires, brochures, cartoons, advertisements, newspaper articles, etc. Thus, learners are exposed to the language spoken in everyday life while through reading literary texts, they have to deal with the language used by native speakers. They are familiarized with different linguistic versions, functions and meanings.
2. Cultural enrichment. For many learners of a foreign language, staying in the target country for a longer period of time is the ideal way to understand verbal and non-verbal aspects related to communication. However, this is a situation that is very unlikely to happen. Thus, literature such as novels, theatre plays, short stories help learners in understanding how communication is structured. Even though, novels are fictional, they present a very colourful environment with characters belonging to different social or regional backgrounds. Readers can understand customs, habits, traditions, mentalities when reading literature.
3. Linguistic enrichment. Students get accustomed to the characteristics of the written language, they read a substantial and contextualized piece of writing. They also learn about syntax, the variety of lexical structures, different ways of

interconnecting ideas that develop their own writing skills. Students become more productive and adventurous when they have to use the language.

4. Personal involvement. Literature can be used in language teaching due to the personal involvement it promotes in readers. Once the student reads a literary piece of writing, s/he starts to live the characters' experience. Students are eager to find out what will happen; they feel close to certain characters and share their emotions. This aspect can have beneficial effects on the overall learning process. Teachers should be careful when selecting a text and choose it based on students' needs, interests, expectations and language level.

Maley (1989:12) mentions some aspects related to the benefits of literature in the classroom.

- Its universal character. The subjects approached by literary pieces of writing are common to different cultures even if the way we approach them is different. The most common themes are: death, love, separation, faith, nature, etc.
- Personal relevance. Students can associate literature to their own lives as it approaches ideas, feelings and events that are part of the readers' personal experience.
- Literature is variety. It involves and refers to all possible subjects.
- Literature as interest. It covers and deals with all subjects that are intrinsically interesting because they are part of the human experience. Literature approaches them in such a way as to attract the reader.
- Economy and suggestive power. One of literature's great powers is its suggestive power. Even in its simplest forms, literature invites us to overcome what is being said about the topic. Thus, literature is ideal to generate discussions about the language.

Selection criteria

When teachers select the literary texts that will be used in teaching, they should take into account the students' needs, motivation, interests, culture and linguistic level. Another important aspect is whether the literary piece of writing is able to awaken the students' interest and generate positive reactions.

Literature can develop the students' speaking, reading and writing skills. They start with discussions and then move to the next stage, i.e. writing. There are three types of writing:

- Controlled writing. These activities are mostly used with beginners and refer to re-writing passages to practice certain grammar structures.
- Guided writing. This type of activity is used with elementary students. Students respond to questions related to the text. In certain cases, students fill in the exercise after they get the first sentences or the main idea of the text.
- Model reproduction. This technique involves paraphrasing, sum-up and adaptation. When paraphrasing, students have to use their own words to reformulate information that they read or listen to.
- Writing about literature. This activity involves traditional tasks such as written answers to questions, writing paragraphs, essays where students analyze the piece of writing or write about the literary style.
- Writing "outside" literature. It involves using a literary piece of writing as help for other activities such as writing compositions – creative missions developed around the intrigue, the characters, the topic and figurative speech. There are

many ways and forms of writing outside literature such as continuing the work, changing the ending, letters to characters (Stern, 1991:336) etc.

The benefits of using drama and novels in teaching

Drama is a very useful resource in foreign language teaching. By using it, students get accustomed to grammar structures in context and learn using the language for communication purposes. Drama usage rises the students' awareness degree in terms of language and culture. There is however, a danger in using it. Cultural imposition should be avoided as it leads to losing the language identity in most cases. Students should use drama to promote the understanding of life experiences, to reflect on particular circumstances and for a deeper understanding of the extralinguistic world. According to Lenore (1993) the benefits of using drama are the following:

- It stimulates imagination and promotes creative thinking
- It develops critical thinking
- Increases efficient listening skills
- Increases empathy and awareness
- Stimulates respect and cooperation among students
- Offers teachers a new perspective on teaching

Mengu (2002:1-4) mentions other benefits of using drama in foreign language teaching:

- It brings authenticity into the classroom
- It exposes students to English culture and the social issues a society might face
- It develops creativity, originality, fluency, flexibility, cooperation and examination of moral attitudes while developing communicative skills
- Offers students the opportunity to develop new ideas and perspective in different contexts.

Drama can be a very useful technique in foreign language teaching when the lessons are student and communication centred.

The benefits of using novels are numerous as well:

- Develops advanced knowledge in terms of cultures and groups of people
- Motivates students to read
- Offers students the opportunity to use their creativity
- Improves critical thinking abilities
- Favours teaching British culture
- Allows students to overcome the barriers of the written word and identify themselves with the characters

Helton, Thomas and Asamani (1998:1-5) explain the educational benefits of novels:

- They stimulate imagination
- Help students to identify the characters' feelings and emotions and thus learn how to react and deal with similar situations.
- Develop oral and written communication skills
- Turn students into lifelong readers

When selecting the novel that they plan to use in teaching, teachers should find an interesting one. The subject should be catchy, the characters memorable. The content needs to be appropriate for the students' cognitive, emotional and linguistic level. When assessing understanding, teachers can use new tests that require the development of sub-skills such as orthography, handwriting, grammar and punctuation. Open questions allow students to make predictions, compare and contrast situations and draw conclusions.

If carefully selected, a novel can make the lesson interesting, motivating and fun.

Research results

As teaching through literature is a relatively sensitive subject, we wanted to see the students` opinions about it. We say “sensitive” because the textbooks do not encourage literature too much and therefore it is the teachers` choice whether to use it or not.

We conducted a quantitative research among the students enrolled in a high school in Arad who had to answer some questions about their opinion regarding teaching literature, the best techniques for teaching it and what literary pieces of writing would interest them most.

The sample consisted of 175 students enrolled in grades 9-12 at the Pedagogical High School of Arad. Their study profiles were social sciences, philology and mathematics-informatics. Thus, we obtained a clearer student profile as maybe students enrolled in mathematics – informatics classes are not that willing to read.

We were surprised to find out that most students would gladly read literature but the text selection should meet certain criteria. It should be interesting, captivating, refer to up-to-date topics and the vocabulary should be appropriate for their level. They stated that if the words are archaic then they feel demotivated and give up the task. Students also said that they prefer modern literature that approaches topics connected to their own life issues and not the old literature that refers to a world that no longer appeals to them.

Chart no 1 presents the students` opinion related to what they would like to read. We can see that novels and drama occupy top positions while poetry and theatre plays scored the lowest number of points.

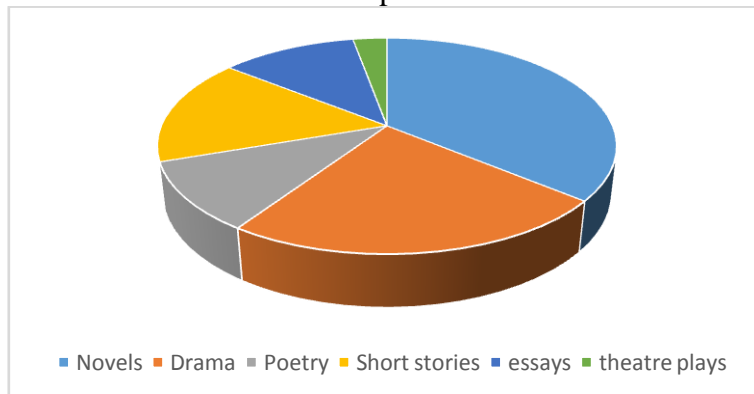
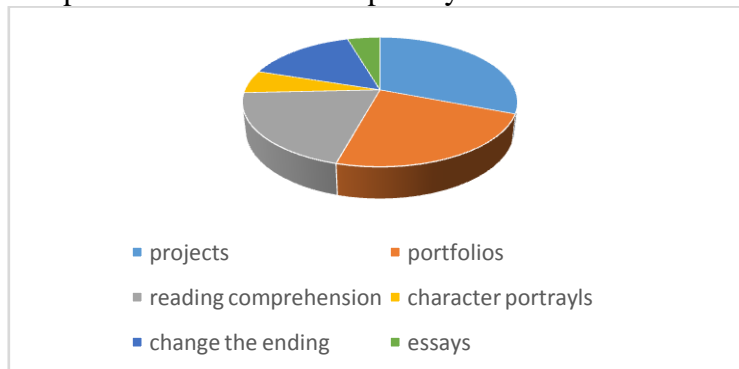


Chart no 2 presents the techniques that students consider the most efficient and challenging. We can see that projects and portfolios interest them a lot, while compositions and character portrayals are of lower interest.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Collie, J., Slater, S., (1990), *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*, Cambridge CUP, 1990

Custodio, B., Sutton, M., (1998) *Literature Based ESL for Secondary School Students* in TESOL Journal, vol 7, no 5, pp.19-23.

Elliot, R., (1990) *Encouraging reader-response to literature in ESL situations* in ELT Journal, vol 44, no 3, pp 191-198

Helton, C.A., Asamani, J., Thomas, E.D. (1998) *A novel approach to the teaching of reading*, Tennessee State University, pp. 1-5

Lenore, K.L., (1993) *The Creative Classroom. A Guide for Using Creative Drama in Classroom*, USA, Elsevier Inc.

Maley, A., (1989) *Down from the Pedestal: Literature as Resource* in *Literature and Learner: Methodological Approaches*. Cambridge: Modern English Publications.