

Using Literature in the EFL Classroom

Yolanda Eugenia Del Castillo Negrete

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California
UABC- Ensenada

BA and Master studies at University of Illinois, USA. Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English, Diploma course in Distance Education Materials Development, Diploma course in E-tutoring. Teacher of English at UABC in the Language School for 13 years. BA in Language teaching professor. Responsible for the social service and the tutoring programs of the Language School.

Summary:

In this age, where IPODS, multi-task cell phones and Internet are a very important part of recreational everyday living, reading as a means of entertainment is at the bottom of the list, if so. It is common knowledge that our country as a whole has a tremendously low percentage of books read per person per year in their own language. EFL teachers have the opportunity to promote interest in Literature in the EFL classroom, in its various forms, short stories, poetry, drama and even novels. Since reading all kinds of literature is part of an individual's growth, giving students this opportunity can enhance their emotional and cultural growth. EFL teachers can use their particular stage to promote interest on literature and its wealth. Reading, analyzing and trusting his own interpretations allows the student to think of literature as something enjoyable, worth learning and hopefully developing on himself the desire to read in the foreign language he/she wants to acquire.

Using Literature in the EFL classroom

The controversy on using literary material in the EFL classroom is not a new one in the EFL experience. Through out the past century (1960-1980), there was the belief that if students were exposed to the best of literature, they would somehow become proficient in the language, specifically English. (Shortand Cadlin, 1981:91) Regardless of the beliefs, using literature to teach ESL students did not give the expected results.

This was the period where the Structuralism Approach was concerned with correctness of grammatical form and not with content, interpretation of the written word or style. During this period the grammar exercise books proliferated and teachers were mainly concerned with correctness of grammar use.

Later on and with the appearance of the Communicative Approach in the late 70`s and very early 80`s, literature as a teaching tool seemed completely unreachable. The tendency in the EFL classrooms was to teach "usable, practical" contents and

here nor poetry nor drama, had a place. During this period dialogues proliferated as a means of communication and gave the EFL student the necessary tools to communicate in the most practical manner, which after all, it is the aim of most EFL courses.

We have to admit that there is a certain amount of truth in viewing literary texts as a separate entity from those materials that are commonly used in an English class, more so when it comes to an EFL classroom. After all, the style and structures present in literary pieces vary enormously depending on the genre, and these structures are not commonly taught in class.

Still, fortunately for us EFL teachers some practitioners proposed the use of literary texts as a teaching tool in the EFL classrooms: Widdowson, 1984 ; Brumfit, 1985 ; Long, 1986 ; Long and Carter, 1987, Lazar, 1993. (Zafeiriadou,2007)

Why use literature

“It can help stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness”, Lazar 1993.

Regardless of the difficulties the practitioner can encounter, using literature is motivating to students. They are exposed to different themes which as a rule textbooks do not include. It gets the students involved in trying to understand what the text is about. It facilitates the expression of emotional responses, as literary pieces describe human emotions and perceptions. The student understands that the piece he is reading is “different” from whatever textbook material he has come in contact with, so his sense of accomplishment is greatly felt by him once he finishes the task. It helps students understand cultural aspects, that a textbook may not include. It stimulates language acquisition through the expression of emotions towards a particular theme and gives the student the opportunity to be faced with structures and forms which are different from the norm. And last but not least, it broadens the sense of language as more than just for practical use.

Three are the most common approaches in the use of literature in the EFL classroom:

Language Based Approach

Content Approach

Personal Growth Approach. (Zafeiriadoe,2007)

Language Based Approach – In this approach we have on one side of the spectrum the practitioners that use literature as a resource which provides stimulating language activities. These can be as simple as finding the verbs in a paragraph from a short story , or as complex as writing the continuation of a paragraph or their own poem .

Content Approach - This approach looks at the content of the literary piece. It intends for the student to analyze and interpret the literary piece. It uses the social, political and , historical background of the text: biography of the author, genre, all and everything that can help the student understand the content of the piece and the circumstances that surrounded the period when it was written.

Personal Growth Approach – In this approach, students are encouraged to express their opinions, feelings, and make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those expressed in the text. The student constructs meaning on the basis of their own experience.

A combination of these three approaches would seem most appropriate for the EFL groups.

How to choose materials

Some practitioners might think that choosing literary pieces is an overbearing task . If we think about how we gather , exercises , reading material, songs that we particularly like , or a game that has been successful with most of our classes. We do this selection slowly, well thought and through trial and error. Choosing literary pieces involves the same process. A careful, purposeful selection of literary pieces that appeal to you and your students.

Considerations

Your selection of material will depend on the type of course and English level of your students. The first levels will require a more extensive warm up and much guidance. Not doing this, will cause the students to feel overwhelmed with the

new material. Some courses allow very little time for extra activities. Decide what type of textbook exercises you can do without, so that you can use the extra time. Practitioners need to take into account the age and educational background of their students in choosing a literary piece. It is a fact that the EFL groups are quite heterogeneous in their cultural background, but still, it is necessary to choose material that could be appealing for most of them.

Most students have had a minimum experience reading literary pieces so it is better less, than more. Less quantity and less difficulty. It is always possible to increase the difficulty level of the material when the time requires it. In regards to cultural information, the warm up is a perfect moment to bring out all those elements that symbolize the culture. Compensate for individual limitations by organizing the group in teams where a partner can be of help to the other. Avoid individual work until the students start feeling more comfortable with their interpretations on the content of literary pieces. Encouragement is of the paramount importance. All interpretations need to be acknowledged so that students become more self confident in the expression of their opinions. (Lazar:1993)

Getting the students involved in the selection of literary pieces, can result in a learning experience for the practitioner. More and more students depend on on line materials, let them search and review whatever material they plan to share and be open to suggestions. Be flexible, you can start with very short poems or songs which are poems with music.

Conclusion

Literature as a tool in the EFL classroom is a viable option. A well thought selection of literary texts and an eclectic approach in using them, can result in a positive experience for students and practitioners. The last ones need to have an enthusiastic and positive attitude towards the discovery of the literary piece and transmit to their students the pleasure of discovering meaning.

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