

USING LITERARY TEXTS IN THE *ESL* CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Learning English as a second language is a discovery process, and the teacher figures an important character on this journey, for it is the instructor's task to make the learning process interesting, free from frustrations and inhibitions, and, above all, meaningful. Using literature is an effective way of capturing the learners' attention. Besides achieving the learning objectives, literary texts can make the teaching/learning process a fun and attractive experience for both teachers and students. Among the various ways of using literature in an ESL classroom, short stories and song lyrics are presented as suitable approaches for teaching young/adult learners from the intermediate level onwards.

Learning English as a second language is a discovery process. It becomes even more apparent when the learner is an adult. It works as if the learner were a child taking his first steps into a new language world. Thus, the teacher figures an important character on this journey, for it is his task to make the learning process interesting, free from frustrations and inhibitions, and, above all, meaningful. Using literature is an effective way of apprehending the learners' attention. Besides achieving the learning objectives, literary texts make the teaching/learning process a fun and attractive experience for both teachers and students. Among the various ways of using literature in an ESL classroom, short stories and song lyrics are presented as suitable approaches for teaching young/adult learners from the intermediate level onwards.

Different from first language acquisition, acquiring and developing a second language can be tough and frustrating. The first language acquisition process takes place when the learner is still a child, and that facilitates the learning process in the sense that the individual does not have the tools to contrast the language being studied to any other language. Another important aspect is that, as a child, the fear of making mistakes is not constantly present. The child has the opportunity to learn from the mistakes without fearing or being embarrassed by them. On the other hand, as a rule, when taking first steps into a new language world, the second language learner has already built and internalized a series of conceptions regarding linguistic features of his first language. Therefore, it seems that the introduction of a new language triggers some conflicts and activates the learners'

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reluctance to accept certain linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language, for there is a mismatch between the young/adult second language learners' linguistic apparatus and the many aspects of the target language. As a result, L2 learners feel apprehensive and insecure in the learning process. This first shock is typical in a discovery process, for anybody feels fragile, insecure, and, somehow, afraid when stepping on an unknown ground. To feel more comfortable in the new territory, second language learners often look for similarities between the L1 and the L2. It is then understandable why students tend to apply the rules for their native language to deal with the target language, needless to mention their embarrassment when a mistake occurs as the result of L1 interference. The role of the instructor, therefore, is of a re-alphabetizer. He alphabetizes again and shapes the students' knowledge and behavior through a new language and a new culture.

Reason to apply literature to *ESL* teaching

Why is literature beneficial in the second language learning process? There are three main reasons for using literary texts in an English language lesson. Firstly, literature is considered valuable authentic material for "it is not fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language" (Collie & Slater, 1997). In this perspective, the professor is the grand initiator of its use and, thus, responsible for making it meaningful to the students. The professor has the freedom to use it as he/she sees fit, that is, applying it in the best way to suit his/her clientele. Another important characteristic of literature is that no matter how old it is, its meaning does not remain static. The main point is that the students, based on a wide range of diversity of background knowledge and culture, build up different interpretations. In this way, as Collie and Slater state it, it is true to say that "a literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader in another country or a different period of history" (1997). Besides, a substantiating point regarding its validity is that by exposing the learner to literary texts, the second and first language learning processes are approximated, for the material presented in it is not designed for the second language learners but for the native speakers of English. Consequently, the literary reading material presents different linguistic uses, forms, and conventions of the written style, such as narration, dialogs, irony, exposition, among others, which reinforce the importance of the teacher as the conductor of this orchestra in accessing and understanding the meaning of literary pieces.

Secondly, literature offers cultural and language enrichment. Some students, even before starting flirting with a new language, demonstrate their unwillingness or impossibility for visiting a country where that particular language is spoken. Therefore, for these students, besides the mass media, one way to access the culture of the target language is to read texts that present a picture of it. Even though literary texts such as novels or short stories can present an invented truth, they still mirror the customs and language use of the characters included in them, as they "offer a full and vivid context in which characters from any social backgrounds can be depicted" (Collie & Slater, 1997). The main point is that the students confront cultural connotations of words and phrases as they learn that culturally appropriate images which language evokes go beyond definitions found in a dictionary (Seelye, 1987). And that can happen to the most common words and phrases in the target language, since literary language, even though well elaborated, can be presented in an accurately and delightfully simple form. Once again, it is crucial to emphasize the contribution of the instructor, as he must present clearly to the students an understanding of the relation between culture and semantics.

To capture the language enrichment that literary texts provide, it is necessary to make an analysis of human beings approach to overcoming any new problem or to acquiring any new knowledge. Knowing that "human beings approach any new problem with an existing set of cognitive structures and, through insight, logical thinking, and various forms of hypothesis testing, call upon whatever prior experiences they have had and whatever cognitive structures they possess to attempt a solution" (Brown, 1994), one can affirm that a literary piece, even with a wide range of new vocabulary and language features mostly only understood by natives, would develop on the students "the ability to make inferences from linguistic clues and deduce meaning from context" (Collie & Slater, 1997). It is then implied that students do transfer knowledge and make generalizations from their native language to the target one, and this interference of one language on the other should be explored by the teacher as a positive insight. It is also true that students could apply these tools, inference and the use of context clues, to any other kind of reading. However, the emphasis is being given on authentic and language enriching texts as a way of promoting productive language input.

Finally, and most appealing to the learner, literary texts can promote a deeper personal

involvement for both students and professors. Contrary to the analytical characteristic of conventional learning, through literature, the students have the opportunity to emotionally participate in the process of learning a new language. As Collie and Slater depict, "engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system" (1997). In short, the students are so engaged in the plot that they pay little attention to or even forget about the difficulties they might have regarding vocabulary or any other aspects of the target language. Somehow, they become more worried about understanding the story, which actually becomes part of their concern. It works as if a person were trying to understand a movie he/she is not able to decode the language. The desire to understand and become part of the context is so infuriating that it helps the learners to overcome language obstacles. Again, the instructor's involvement is of extreme importance. Hence, he/she needs to carefully choose what is to be read, "for it is at this point that the difference between the expectations of the teacher and those of his disciples become painfully evident" (Seelye, 1987).

Even though it is the teacher's task to control everything that goes on in the classroom, it is, too, understood that the learners' beliefs also need to be taken in consideration, due to the fact that they are both active participants in the teaching/learning process. In this way, before deciding on what to read, it would be relevant to conduct a survey of the students' taste for reading, for, even before getting to class, the students already present their own beliefs about the usefulness of what is to be learned as well as their potential and desire to learn such subject (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). As Tumposky (1991) affirms, "learners' beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude toward the language itself as well as toward language learning in general." Based on this assumption, it is understood that students are indeed in the position to provide a positive input as they disclose their beliefs about language learning, about their own abilities as language learners, and their different goals for learning a new language. To sum up, it is the crucial time for interaction between instructors and learners because "differences between teachers' and learners' beliefs can sometimes lead to a mismatch between their assumptions about what is useful to focus on in a language lesson" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

What is to be read?

Before making any decision about what should be read, the professor should consider the cognitive styles of four different types of learners as presented by Knowles (1982): concrete learning style, in which the students demonstrate interest in information that has immediate value; analytical learning style, in which learners prefer a logical, systematic presentation of new learning material; communicative learning style, in which learners need personal feedback and interaction; and authority-oriented learning style, in which students express their like and need for structure and sequential progression.

Because there are linguistic and cultural barriers between the L2 learners and the reading material, the sort of literature most suitable for the class should be first based on the students' level of language difficulty, that is, a work that is not much above the students' normal reading proficiency. Thus, each different group of students along with its needs, interests, cultural background and language level requires a different analysis for deciding on what to read. All together, this choice should provide stimuli for personal involvement on the part of the students. As Collie and Slater (1997) summarize it, "it is important to choose books which are relevant to the life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner." Other considerations concern the time available for the activity, the curriculum, and the culture of the institution where the teaching takes place.

Among different categories of literature, two genres, short stories and song lyrics, are examined in order to suggest how literature could be useful for improving the learners' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

SHORT STORIES

There are several advantages for using short stories in an ESL classroom. The most revealing one is their practical length, which allows the students to conclude the task of reading on one sitting, or, depending on the teachers' approach, it can be entirely read within one or two class lessons. As students are always worried about the amount of work they need to perform and often have the feeling of being overwhelmed, reading short stories seems to be less frightening, for their own definition suggests, they are "short." And because they are short, short stories can be applied more frequently, which means that a greater number of short stories

can be employed and that, consequently, increases the possibility of finding pieces that are appealing to each individual's tastes and interests. Still pertaining to its length, short stories can be applied to any course, no matter its level or duration.

Another major characteristic of short stories is that they are extremely compressed. Even though it denotes a good attribute because the students access a great deal of information by reading fewer words, it also hides the problem of engaging economy of language and imagery (Collie & Slater, 1997), which can keep the reader from appreciating the quality of the work, even after understanding its theme. It is the teacher's duty to guide the students on this journey, for when reading a short story, the students "are invited to see the universe in a grain of sand, and when they look at the grain of sand, they must be helped to see the universe within it, and to respond to it on an emotional level" (Collie & Slater, 1997).

South of The Slot by Jack London

This interesting story grabs the readers' attention because it deals mainly with a universal theme, love. It narrates the old days of San Francisco, California, when the city was divided into two sections by the Slot, a symbol of social class distinction: North of the Slot, where the rich people lived; and South of the Slot, where the poor people lived. Even though people from different sections would not mix, the main character, Professor Freddie Drummond, never seems to hesitate in doing so. During his sociological research for writing books on the working class, he changes his name to Bill Totts and mixes with the folks who live South of the Slot. London narrates the conflicts and contrasts between the two lives of the main character. The plot becomes more intricate as Professor Drummond falls in love with a workingwoman.

To apprehend the students' attention and get them in the mood for reading this short story, the professor can promote, as a warm-up activity, a discussion on social status, rich versus poor, the changes love can make in someone's life, etc. He can also make reference to any popular events going on at the time the class lesson takes place, such as soap operas, movies, public events involving famous people, and so on, which are related to the main idea of the short story and, as a result, activate the students' schemata.

Reading

For the reading activity, which can be taken as an in class or take home exercise, depending on the curriculum constraints and the length and level of

the material, the students should first be asked to read only for the gist, avoiding the use of the dictionary as much as possible. Concerning vocabulary, it is frightening just to think about the thousands of words of the English language. However, knowing how it is composed and organized, the teacher can apply the structuring principles of vocabulary formation to teach it as other features of the English language such as grammatical rules (McCarthy, 1995). The use of prefixes and suffixes as well as the employment of synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms are pertinent examples. It is important to remember that nowadays, it is very common to find short stories that already bring the definition of certain unusual words. Students should be talked into becoming independent readers by underlining unknown words and going back to the same text or sentence or paragraph for a second or even a third time to guess the meaning of these words through the context. If the meaning is still unclear, before prescribing the use of a dictionary, orient the student to "pretend they understand and explain the meaning of the sentence to themselves or someone else. They might be amazed by what they already know since one often understands and knows more than he gives himself credit for" (Ellis, 1997). As a last resource, the English/English dictionary or/and the instructor can be activated. In this manner, the students exercise active reading by finding out for themselves the meaning of the text. Next, the instructor uses the content as a trigger for introducing language features. By holding the students' attention through semantics, grammar and syntactic skills are developed.

Next step, students should read the whole short story for the second time in order to achieve its full richness. It is now the time for the teacher to emphasize some grammar and syntactical features. For instance, the instructor can ask the students to check verb tenses for parallelism, which constitutes one major mistake made in ESL composition classes. The teacher can also ask the students to check how many times the author switches verb tenses and why he/she does it. Other activities to be performed during the second time they read the short story is to pay close attention to the use of sentence connectors such as coordinating and subordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs. These features, which are directly related to text production, give the instructor the perfect insight to introduce the notion of simple, compound, and complex sentences.

Concerning the inherited – innate – features of the English language, such as the use of articles and prepositions, students should be advised to be aware of their usage in the short story in order to

establish a pattern for their application instead of only applying their rules. The same advice applies to the use of punctuation and mechanics - capitalization, titles, direct quotations, and minor marks of punctuation - even though there are more solid rules for their application.

The use of pronouns should also receive special attention, for students always get confused in their composition works when having to refer to antecedents or making antecedents and pronouns agree. From this perspective, the students could be assigned at least two short stories a month and all the guidance for the reading can be given using the last ten to fifteen minutes of each class or using the whole class period once or twice a month according to the curriculum and to the teachers' and students' convenience.

Writing

For the writing activity, at a first stage, the students should demonstrate their reading ability by making an outline of the whole story. They should not escape identifying topic, main and secondary ideas, subordinate items, among others. The organization and layout of the outline - indentations, Roman numerals, numbers, and letters - help the students visualize at a glance how one idea relates to another and how all aspects of the short story relate to the whole (Smith, 1993). Based on this outline, the students are asked to retell the story in their own words. At the beginning, it is always a good idea to ask them to paraphrase. Because they do not want to miss any part of the story and are not very firm in extracting its central idea, they tend to write in excess. This is the ideal time for the instructor to convince the L2 learners to keep the habit of writing. The teacher's main focus should be on getting the students into writing and not strictly on the quality of their writing. The students need to be motivated to continue writing, and rewarding should outweigh any major frustration.

As the students become used to paraphrasing short stories, the instructor can start "shrinking" their writings by asking them to summarize the story. The summaries, at the beginning, can amount to five paragraphs and then, progressively, be reduced to one paragraph as the students improve their skills in extracting main points. To guide the students to do what is expected, the teacher can provide a prompt, such as questions about the story, for building the paragraph. For instance, by answering the following questions borrowed from Costa (1983), the students can write a single paragraph that summarizes the whole story.

Who was Freddie Drummond? Why did he live among the poor people south of Market Street? After working for a while south of the Slot, how did Professor Drummond change? Who was Bill Totts and how was he different from Freddie Drummond? What are some examples of things Bill Totts did south of the Slot that Freddie Drummond would never have done? Who was Mary Condon and why was Freddie afraid to cross south of the Slot after he fell in love with her? Why did Drummond decide to marry Catherine Van Vorst? Compare Catherine with Mary. When did Freddie change his mind about marrying Catherine? How does the story end?

At a third stage, when the students are more familiar with repeating in written form what is originally said by different authors and "imitating" the English structure residing in these literary pieces, they can start expressing their own ideas about the theme and even critique it. They can write about what interests them the most, they can change the end of the story, they can create a new character to change the parts of the story they do not like, and so forth.

This sequence of writings, about the same or different short stories, should be collected and corrected by the instructor. Suggestions for improvement should be given. It is relevant to mention that not every mistake needs to be corrected. The students themselves, as they begin to master the language, will perceive and correct their own mistakes. The instructor can also move from correcting mistakes to only marking them. By doing so, he activates the students' critical thinking proficiency. This positive insight makes the students evaluate their mistakes more carefully and helps them avoid making the same mistake more than once. A reference book such as the *Harbrace College Handbook* could be utilized as a guide for the students to revise their mistakes on their own after the teacher checks the compositions. The professor can also compile the most common mistakes among the group, lecture on them, and produce a handout with suggestions for overcoming such problems.

Listening and speaking

For the listening and speaking practices, activities that are directly connected to one another and may take place simultaneously, the students can be paired or grouped in number of three to orally interact with each other. By using the outline

produced for the reading activity, they can, individually or in pairs or groups, deliver a speech to the rest of the class. For doing so, they will have first to decide on the general purpose of their speech, that is, to inform, to persuade, or/and to entertain or inspire (Makay, 1995). Next, depending on the response they expect from their audience, they will state their specific purpose. For instance, they can bring out polemical questions such as "Should Professor Drummond marry Catherine Van Vorst or Mary Condon? Why?" In this case, the presenters elicit interest from the audience to share their feelings. This involvement results in an effective and affective participation, thus, activating the students' great effort to orally use the target language. For best result, the speech should be characterized as an extemporaneous one, in which the ESL students present the topic or discussion in a spontaneous manner. It does not mean that they have to memorize it and say it by heart nor do they have to read it out of a prepared text. It should be delivered in a conversational tone, giving the other students the impression that the presenter is talking to them (Adler and Rodman, 1994). The students should be advised to keep the habit of speaking freely from the very beginning. At this point, if students are still crawling into the new language world, communication should be the top goal. Minor errors of grammar and pronunciation should not be a reason for interruption.

Another suggestion is to place the students in groups of three and, having their compositions in hands, take turns reading them out loud to the group in order to identify grammar and pronunciation mistakes and any wrong information concerning the plot. When they read out loud, they listen to their own voices, to their own writings, and to what is inside their brains. As a result, they check if what they intended to say in written form matches what they actually wrote. They identify mistakes they would probably not be able to by reading silently. Furthermore, they have two other students to listen to the recitation and to demonstrate their understanding. The partners' response is thus essential for the success of such activity. This sort of collaborative work lowers the students' level of anxiety and let them express themselves more freely, for the frightening presence of the professor is out of the group. It also pushes the students into talking, breaking the myth that they never have the opportunity to speak in class or that they are going to finish the course without learning how to speak. The teachers' task is to visit the groups and make corrections and suggestions as he/she sees fit.

SONG LYRICS

The advantage of using song lyrics is that, like a poem, they usually discuss universal themes and are often presented in a way that many different interpretations can be applied. Consequently, they serve as an appealing inspiration for writing, not to mention how captivating it is for L2 students to understand, discuss, and write about a piece known by all their friends outside the classroom, for the chosen song can be a recent hit or a well known old song. In addition, song lyrics are often awfully short, so any assignment concerning them can be accomplished in one class period or even be introduced as a fun activity after teaching peculiarities of the English language that are considered too difficult, and then break the ice.

Song lyrics are self-motivating. It is difficult to find someone who does not like music. However, the professor needs to select not only the most appropriate lyrics but also the most suitable melody. This choice will determine whether the students will like it or not. Most song lyrics depict pronunciation features such as rhythm and stress, and, as a lyrical piece, it also presents rhymes and close related sounds. Therefore, working with listening and speaking skills through them is not a difficult task. The students can even memorize the words and recite them to the rest of the class. In this context, pronunciation features easily become part of the second language learners' acquired knowledge. In fact, the melody itself provides the ambience for implementing the utmost notion of teaching and learning, that is, the introduction of an activity that teaches and promotes fun at the same time. Depending on the type of song, slang words, English expressions, and idioms can also be taught. Afterwards, the simple fact of getting the students to sing along with the tape is a positive result.

The Logical Song by Rick Davies & Roger Hodgson

When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful,
A miracle, oh it was beautiful, magical.
And all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily,
Joyfully, playfully watching me.
But then they sent me away to teach me how to be sensible,
Logical, responsible, practical.
And they showed me a world where I could be so dependable,
Clinical, intellectual, cynical.

There are times when all the world's asleep,
The questions run too deep
For such a simple man.
Won't you please, please tell me what we've
learned
I know it sounds absurd
But please tell me who I am.

Now watch what you say or they'll be calling you
a radical,
Liberal, fanatical, criminal.
Won't you sign up your name, we'd like to feel
you're
Acceptable, respectable, presentable, a vegetable!
At night, when all the world's asleep,
The questions run so deep
For such a simple man.
Won't you please, please tell me what we've
learned
I know it sounds absurd
But please tell me who I am.

Listening and speaking

In this particular song, the four skills are very well contemplated. For listening and speaking, which should, in fact, take place before reading and writing activities, the teacher can explore the students' oral skills without letting them see the words on paper. As a warm-up activity, the L2 students can be induced to think about how life changes as one leaves his childhood and has to assume responsibilities as an adult. What are the most difficult changes? How different does the world become when one comes into being an adult? Next, after understanding the title and making assumptions about what the lyrics will possibly exhibit, the students listen to the song for the first time. Next, a detailed examination of rhymes and of sequence of similar sounds as in *radical, liberal, fanatical, criminal* and *acceptable, respectable, presentable, a vegetable!* takes place to work on pronunciation, still without showing the words on paper. After playing the song for at least two more times, the instructor gives the students a copy of the lyrics in the form of cloze exercises for them to fill in as the song is, again, played, now for the fourth time. Then, for checking if they got the correct words, the instructor asks them to take turns reading each stanza out loud emphasizing rhythm, stress, and intonation. Finally, the teacher plays the song once more and lets them have their fun singing, dancing, or just listening.

Reading and writing

These lyrics are ideal to be used as a supplementary activity for the teaching of adjectives and adverbs. When analyzing the first stanza, the professor can compare *wonderful* to *happily* and *beautiful* to *joyfully* and so on, reinforcing the rules for their application. After the lyrics are fully understood, the students can be asked to write a poem, four verses, or a paragraph regarding their perception of the original lyrics. It is guaranteed that interpretations of all sorts will be evoked. To make this activity more effective, the students need to be instructed to freely write down whatever crosses their thoughts concerning the lyrics. It is their opportunity to use correct grammar to write *nonsense*. This is not the right time to look only for content. At this stage, inspiration is engaged to elicit English grammar patterns. To close the reading and writing activities, the students can exchange poems or paragraphs and read them out loud to the rest of the class and have a good time laughing at each other catharsis.

In conclusion, the use of literary texts for teaching English as a second language can be an effective, fun, and rewarding process for both teachers and students. The students get so much involved in the theme of short stories and song lyrics that they do not even notice the obstacles they are overcoming. It is then true to say that literature can help providing a suitable ambience for teaching English to second language learners.

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