

ELT



Ireland bulletin

No. 5

16th February 2020

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Why use literature in the ELT classroom?

by Damian Cunniff (Teacher, GRETB)

Literature as a word and as a concept often strikes fear into the hearts of learners who equate it with difficult language, frustration and interminably long passages of script forever highlighting the student's weakness in the English language.

Likewise, teachers tend to shy away from literature as they view it as a metaphorical loose cannon with the propensity to lead them and their lessons in directions they do not wish to travel.

This article seeks to allay some of the fears attached to using literature in the ESL classroom and to underline how by using literature as an authentic device, lessons can be made more dynamic and interesting for the learner and teacher alike

Recently, I conducted a survey with my C1 class to ascertain what they thought of their English learning experience and to give them the opportunity to have a say and make suggestions of how that experience might be improved.

Some learners stated that they enjoyed when 'real' material was used in the classroom rather than the 'other' material which they were so used to seeing, especially when learning English in their own country. The so-called 'other' material they were referring to was from ESL course books; material which they felt did not reflect the language as used by first language speakers and that the 'real' material or authentic items, newspapers, journals and books seemed to have a more positive impact on their learning.

These learners felt that when using authentic material that they were engaging with the language in a truer way, using the tools of language which are utilised daily by English L1 speakers.

The cultural aspect

Traditional course books serve an invaluable role in assisting learners and teachers alike. However, their overutilization and an institutional tendency to rely solely on them can often be detrimental to dynamic learning. I have long been an advocate for using authentic material in my English language lessons and I like to use literature as much as I can, following on from Baird et al who espouse the idea that literature is merely language applied to certain authentic settings and contexts (Baird, 1978). Literature of a particular country, a particular era or a particular social setting can enhance the English learning experience for learners. Reading in English but from different cultural perspectives acknowledges the diverse nature of the English language and expands away from the idea of English as being purely British centred. For example exposing learners to Irish literature while they study English in Ireland can give learners a more extensive grounding in the language of the region where their learning is centred.

“literature in an ESL context can represent a significant commitment and to achieve the best results ”

The contextual aspect

Literature enhances not just the functional nature of language so heavily underpinned in course books; the rather closed but practical 'I am, You are approach' so to speak, but also seeks to expand into other areas of language, to contextualise language in ways which transcend mere literacy into areas of emotion, cultural expression and connotation which lexis and grammar alone cannot express. Extracts of news stories and magazine articles have their purpose and are the mainstay of the reading classroom but they can often be soulless in their construction and rarely invest their readers with rich contextual fodder in which to enhance their learning experience. In essence literary pieces used as core learning material give learners the opportunity in their reading to visit other countries, learn not only the language but metaphorically to meet the people and gain some experience of their lives. This is the contextual gravitas which literature provides. There is of course also a sense of achievement and accomplishment which comes from having read a well-known literary piece in another language. It is true that often using literature in an ESL context can represent a significant commitment and to achieve the best results, often both teacher and learners have to be up for the challenge. However, engaging in the literary endeavour does not always mean a five hundred page novel. Often shorter poems and short stories achieve the same result as asking for the more daunting commitment of novel reading. Whatever approach is made, it is time to debunk the idea that

reading in another language is a mountain of pain which is best avoided. To quote Ezra Pound 'literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree (Pound, 1932).

So why use literature in your classroom?

Bernardo (2006) speaks of how using literature in the classroom is to make language learning a beautiful experience but it could be argued that it is not enough to state that literature is wonderful and therefore must be shared? Though Bernardo's thesis is a laudable one this may not be the belief of all students or even teachers for that matter. Quite simply not everyone reads and even of those who read, not everyone finds it beautiful. Thankfully there are other benefits beyond the purely aspirational.

Literature especially at higher levels develops cognitive awareness of schema and connects thinking to language due to the inter-relationship of imagination and true life experiences.(Machura,2006) It has also been shown that literature benefits language in instigating a top down approach to learning, aided in part by the teacher but driven by the material and allowing for expansion in understanding which is not necessarily confined to the words on the page but is unique in a way to the individual learner. It questions not only what is being learned but also how language is processed by the individual. (Garvie,1990) Perhaps it could be said that literature disenfranchises the lockstep approach and opens up the opportunity for learning as a uniquely personal and

individual experience guided by an instructor certainly but allowing a freedom of expression which might be seen as impossible from a course book gleaned lesson.

Learning through literature aids communicative competence. A good portion of novels contain dialogue. This dialogue is natural, in turns both academic and colloquial and often culturally diverse. It reflects the language of the masses and is often more authentic than that which is evident in course books.

As Povey points out, teaching through literature advances students competence in all language skills. (Povey, 1972) Engagement with the language and thus with meaning is required, from dictionary definitions, to the connotation and situational usage of the language. Expansion from the words on the page can often be achieved by bringing in poetry and dramatic pieces to the lessons thereby employing the spoken word. Showing how language changes when employed with emotion and emphasis.

As Bernardo stated. Literature 'can' make the language learning experience beautiful and authenticity adds a realism to that beauty but beauty and practicality can also live side by side if one wishes to see it. (Bernardo, 2006)

Literature employs different styles of writing and different voices which mirror real life language usage. Depending on the learner, the voices can be ones of inspiration or functional tools to add to a growing vocabulary store.

Even small extracts of literary pieces hold a mine of lexical and grammatical structures which can be expanded upon in subsequent lessons or indeed pieces can be chosen specifically to teach particular lexis or display a grammar point; Kipling's 'if' (Kipling, 1937) to teach the first conditional for example. Likewise this same piece can also be expanded upon to enhance a learner's knowledge of the nuance of language.

Literature can be used to foster reading skills, to analyse the function, meaning and use in a piece of writing, to enhance an understanding of punctuation and it can also be utilised as a good jumping off point from where discussions can be developed.

Using literature in the language classroom is not a new idea but traditionally, poems, stories, novels etc., have been utilised as supplementary tools to assist learners only after they have gone through the lockstep approach of learning the rules of grammar and lexis. In other words, literature was only used as a measuring stick to understanding rather than core syllabus material. I would suggest that this idea should be revised

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Conclusion

In reality there is no end to how useful literature can be in the language classroom. True it takes a little extra effort than teaching directly from course books. There are no teacher's books to tell you what to do. On the other hand this could be seen as a good thing, a way of freeing a teacher up to teach a unique lesson and perhaps to enjoy the language as much as they hope their students are doing.

For those who live in terror of straying away from the comfort of the course book it is still a worthy endeavour to use the novel or the poem or the short-story as a way of enhancing lessons. Learning a grammar point and then noticing how it is used in a novel to set a scene, adds to the authentic nature of the language. Using alliteration in poetry to show the importance of sound and pronunciation can also be very helpful. These are just two examples that a dynamic teacher can use but with a little imagination the variation of lessons gleaned from literary pieces could also be as endless as there are books worth reading.

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