

LITERATURE AND ITS PLACE IN THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

Laura MURGU²

laura_murgu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this assignment is to briefly give some thought to the secondary school students that we have to prepare for the world of science in which they will want to progress and have a career, to the motivation they have to learn English, to the things they value and taking all these into consideration to bring arguments for and against re-introducing literature in the English classes.

KEYWORDS: abilities, literature, methods, reading, skills

1. Why teaching Literature – pros and cons?

We live in a world where knowledge is power³.

Our pupils leave school with their head (more or less) full of knowledge, enough to pass any examination. But it could come as something of a shock to encounter the world outside for the first time and to realize that they are woefully ill-equipped, not only for the necessary business of earning a living, but, more importantly, for coping with all the new decisions which may come their way, in both life and work. I believe that we train our pupils to deal with closed problems, whereas most life problems are open-ended problems.

Our pupils' destinies are linked; they are, first of all, co-workers, colleagues, a team and not competitors. In life we have to discover the necessity of others.

Related to these ideas I believe that introducing Literature from the integrated skill and communicative approach point of view, may create and support an ideal environment (a sort of a forum) to connect our pupils. Literature provides mechanisms for the exchange of ideas and personal experiences, it encourages exploration, experimentation and communication for more effective learning, it improves team skills, and it develops the ability to use information independently. It also develops the capacity for

² Profesor de Limba engleză la Colegiul Tehnic „Dimitrie Ghika”, Comănești.

³ Nordström, K., Ridderstråle, J., 2003, *Karaoke Capitalism. Management for Mankind*, Stockholm, BookHouse Publishing Ltd, p.156.

improvisation as well as creativity. It involves a redistribution of responsibilities among pupils capable of reacting and thinking independently on contemporary trends.

When working in pairs or in groups, pupils have the opportunity to learn and develop some qualities⁴ which are highly required in the modern working environment such as:

- communication skills
- empathy with other cultures
- time management skills
- attention to detail
- good analytical ability based on arguments
- reliable team player with sound task-based judgement and the list may go on.

I do not want to say that re-introducing Literature during the English classes is the solution to all problems we face nowadays with the educational reforms but, life is changing so fast that schools should be prepared for it, the content of syllabuses should be brought fully up-to-date on a regular basis and the way in which pupils are taught to think should be re-examined.

Almost every language teacher has, at some time, asked students to read a story or text as homework and then come to class prepared to discuss the story. But, we all know that students do not like this type of assigned reading and whole class discussion. Even native English speaking students often claim that their *least favourite*, *most hated*, or *most difficult* courses in high school are their Reading or Literature classes. If even English speaking students hate these courses, how can we make talking about literature interesting for our Romanian students? Given appropriate training, learners of English as a second or foreign language can develop the necessary skills to find their own way into even quite difficult works of literature⁵.

As teachers of English as a Foreign Language our main concern is to help learners acquire communicative competence. For this reason we tend to focus on teaching standard forms of linguistic expression. However, despite acquiring linguistic accuracy, it is apparent that English

4 Nordström, K., Ridderstråle, J., 2007, *Funky Business: Talent Makes Capital Dance*, Stockholm, Pearson Education, p. 27.

5 Buckledee S, "Language & Literature in Tertiary Education: The Case for Stylistics", from Forum, No. 2, Vol. 40, April 2002, p.9.

foreign language speakers still have difficulties in comprehending the nuances, creativity and versatility which characterise even standard and transactional forms of English, as these humorous public notices demonstrate⁶:

- We take your bags and send them in all directions. – Copenhagen airline ticket office
- Would you like to ride on your own ass? – Advertisement for donkey rides in Thailand
- You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid. – Japanese hotel

The role of literature in the English classroom has been re-assessed and many now view literary texts as providing rich linguistic input, effective stimuli for students to express themselves in other languages and a potential source of learner motivation. The literature used in English classrooms today is no longer restricted to texts from certain countries e.g. UK, USA, but includes the work of writers from a diverse range of countries and cultures using different forms of English. Literary texts can be studied in their original forms or in simplified or abridged versions. “A literary text is authentic text, real language in context to which we can respond directly”⁷. The reader has an active, interactional role in working with and making sense of the language.

Teaching literature can and should be part of our routine and schedule as English teachers. Not only in order to teach our potential students rules, structures, grammar and such, but also to provide them with the best of what we know and to make them appreciate the language in its various forms. Literature can be taught and used as a tool to enrich their intellectual, personal and emotional world.

The advantages of teaching literature in English Foreign Language class are:

- It is enjoyable to read.
- It provides examples of different ways of writings.
- It is a good basis for exposure to new vocabulary.
- It provides a good basis for communicative activities involving the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

⁶ <http://koti.mbnet.fi/neptunia/english.htm>(18th October 2008).

⁷ Brumfit, C. J. & Carter, R. A., 1991, *Literature and Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.15.

- Studying literature enables us to understand the foreign culture more clearly⁸.

- It can supply good jump off points for class discussions as well as for writing⁹.

- Alongside the intellect that is invested in reading poetry, it involves emotions too (which adds to the students' motivation and contributes to their personal lives)

- It has value as part of students' general education, since it is part of the target language culture.

- It can encourage empathetic emotions (towards the poem, the author, the idea of it) as well as creative thinking – thinking “outside of the box”.

- It raises awareness of different conflicts and real life events.

- It can foster reading skills, such as: reading faster, learning to differentiate between the main idea and the less important details.

- It can also provide an opportunity for negotiation of meanings which is needed and essential for Foreign Language Acquisition (a good learner will not hesitate to ask a question or any clarification, and literature provides students that opportunity – to negotiate on meaning).

Alongside the many advantages there are some disadvantages of teaching literature in English Foreign Language class:

- If it is chronological, it is more challenging to motivate student interest¹⁰.

- Simplified versions of classic literature pieces are often a poor representation of the original¹¹.

- Many literary texts are long and time consuming to teach.

- By using different texts as a basis for language teaching, the teacher may spoil the students' enjoyment.

- Students of science and technology may find literature not related to their world and may often be irrelevant to their needs.

8 *Idem*, p. 25.

9 Ur, P., 1999, *A Course in Language Teaching: Trainee Book*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 89

10 Beach, R., et alii, 2006, *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, p. 57

9 Ur, P., 1999, *A Course in Language Teaching: Trainee Book*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 89.

11 Ur, P., 1999, *A Course in Language Teaching: Trainee Book*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 89.

- The cultural background of a literary piece may be foreign to the students in such way that the text might sound meaningless to them (in a way that they can't even relate to it).

Although there are more benefits and advantages for teaching literature than disadvantages, these six disadvantages are mainly traps that teachers often tend to fall into. Therefore, it is important to bare them in mind and to choose wisely.

Who is Literature addressed to?

„The foundation of every state is the education of its youth.”

(Diogenes Laertius)

We live at a time when the new generation is raised to think that everything is always changing. The English language is a mere functional tool to serve the future ability of a student who wants to progress and have a career. Literature is not important in the eyes of educators because they are trying to prepare their students for the world of science, and scientific functionality does not require the knowledge of poetry, playwriting and novels. These are seen as esoteric and redundant. We are raising the next generation so they will never hear of Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson.

It is sometimes quite difficult and hopeless to teach secondary school students. They are less motivated than we used to be and to motivate them is a very difficult work. They are tired of school and they are bored and they are raised with the TV set and now with computers. Teenagers present discipline problems and they are sensitive about their individual identity. They value love and friendship very much. “Teenagers, if they are engaged, have a great capacity to learn, a great potential for creativity, and a passionate commitment to things which interest them. There is almost nothing more exciting than a class of involved young people at this age pursuing a learning goal with enthusiasm. Our job, therefore, must be to provoke student engagement with material which is relevant and involving. At the same time we need to do what we can to bolster our students' self-esteem, and be conscious, always, of their need for identity”¹².

12 Harmer, J., 2005, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, London, Longman Publishing, p.39

What we should not do is to ridicule or humiliate them and neither should we laugh at nor criticise them. We have to respect and encourage them.

Teenagers have got the biggest potential to learn the language, because they have time, good memory and they are able to discuss abstract issues. When they feel relaxed, they can talk about anything they consider interesting and their creativity and imagination is endless. But students' world of thought and experience is different from adults'. So, teachers must link language teaching far more closely to the students' everyday interests. On the other hand, students must be encouraged to respond to texts and situations with their own thoughts and experience, rather than by answering questions and doing abstract learning activities. They need constructive feedback on whatever they do.

I consider that the optional classes in high school form the best opportunity to motivate and guide our pupils to a personal discovery. A literature-based approach during the English classes promotes active engagement and collaborative work so that learners contribute to class activities through direct interaction with either the instructor or with peers. They also participate through sharing information, asking questions, and reflecting on their understanding, as well as working together to make sense of the text under study. Another advantage of this instructional approach is its incorporation of a human component so that learners can identify with characters that face common human conflicts and problems, such as fear, hate, love, etc. Learners have the opportunity to reflect on the characters' actions and choices and then discuss whether they agree or disagree with the characters' decisions. All these are arguments in favour of re-introducing Literature in classes.

Bibliography

- [1] Beach, R., et alii, (2006), *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- [2] Brumfit, C. J. & Carter, R. A., 1991, *Literature and Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [3] Buckledee S, "Language & Literature in Tertiary Education: The Case for Stylistics", from *Forum*, No. 2, Vol. 40, April 2002.
- [4] Harmer, J., (2005), *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, London, Longman Publishing.

- [5] Nordström, K., Ridderstråle, J., 2007, *Funky Business: Talent Makes Capital Dance*, Stockholm, Pearson Education.
- [6] Nordström, K., Ridderstråle, J., 2003, *Karaoke Capitalism. Management for Mankind*, Stockholm, BookHouse Publishing Ltd.
- [7] Ur, P., 1999, *A Course in Language Teaching: Trainee Book*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Ur, P., 1999, *A Course in Language Teaching: Trainee Book*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Webografy

<http://koti.mbnet.fi/neptunia/english.htm> (18th October 2008).