

Mario Pace, 2017

Volume1 Issue 1, pp. 01-12

Date of Publication: 04th September, 2017

DOI- <https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijtel.2017.11.113>

This paper can be cited as: Pace, M. (2017). *Adapting Literature to the Language Classroom*. PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning, 1(1), 01-12.

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ADAPTING LITERATURE TO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Very often we hear teachers arguing and complaining that today, thanks to the era of technology we live in, our students are not only no longer interested in reading but many have even lost the love for learning languages. In fact, notwithstanding all the efforts done by schools, parents and teachers, most students fail to understand the real benefits of language learning and prefer dedicating their efforts to other subjects like sciences and IT. A very good way of motivating students to love both reading for its own sake as well as languages is by adapting literature to the language classroom. This can be very challenging for the language teacher as it requires the implementation of various important concepts and strategies but at the same time very rewarding for students since literature very often deals with feelings, emotions, personal issues and has the ability to potentially enlarge a reader's sense about the many possible ways to live. Many people still consider literature as a separate subject that has nothing to do with language learning, an assumption which is based on a reductive interpretation of the concept of language teaching and learning. Regardless of the difficulties the practitioner can encounter, using literature exposes students to different themes which textbooks usually do not include and consequently motivates students. Even more so if we consider literature as just another word for written or spoken media. Indeed, literature is one of the best tools to master a language as it is used in a real life context.

Keywords

Language Teaching & Learning; Literature; Learner Motivation; Teaching Strategies

1. Introduction

Foreign language educators have long been in search of answers to account for the great difficulty faced by a number of students when learning a foreign language where others find it less difficult. Students who have difficulty with foreign language learning are often described as underachievers, or lacking in motivation, or as having language learning disabilities (Yanuarto, 2015: 1322).

Teaching languages in today's classrooms does no longer simply require developing one's knowledge of and obtaining proficiency in the language one would like to teach, or simply learning how to teach a language. The introduction of technology has shifted the language teachers' priorities in class and their biggest challenge is no longer constituted by the information and knowledge they need to transmit to the students. One of the language teacher's main priority in class is how to communicate with the students, how to pass on to the students the love and passion for learning the language (Pace, 2015). In other words, motivating the students by making them aware not only of the utility of the language being learnt in class but also by instilling in them the emotions of language learning through the creation of a positive relationship wherein the student's role is converted from being simply a "spectator" to becoming the protagonist of that same learning experience. One of the greatest concerns for teachers who aspire to accomplish such a vision is the preparation and organization of the teaching and learning materials and how these are to be presented and applied in class to meet the needs and abilities of the students in multi-cultural classrooms that have become very common in the 21st century.

Table 1: *The Language Teachers' Biggest Challenges*

The language teachers' biggest challenges	
CHALLENGES	KEYS
✓ Communication with students	✓ Making the language relevant to their lives
✓ Passing on the love & passion for learning the language	✓ Instilling the emotions of language learning
✓ Motivation	✓ Making them the protagonists of the learning experience

Such a scenario has brought about new challenges for learners (Goh & Vandergrift, 2012), especially as they try to improve their ability in specific language skills. This has also instigated, during the last decades, various countries across the world to put in new efforts aimed at improving language education especially throughout the years of compulsory education. Notwithstanding this however, in many countries students are not motivated to learn languages at school. A question worth posing and considering here is: why is this happening? Although there may exist various answers for this question, one of the main reasons is that students, very often, see little connection between what is taught in the language class and real life situations and consequently fail to perceive the utility of language learning, leading in turn to demotivation. And literature can be the secret to student motivation, which is a key factor in language successful learning, by increasing pupils' awareness of the usefulness of the languages they learn. In fact, when students are learning a language, it inherently involves learning not only about the language but also about the culture (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). In this respect, the Modern Language Association (2012) affirms in its statement that learning another language 'serves as a portal to the literatures, cultures, historical perspectives, and human experiences that constitute the human record'.

2. Why Literature?

The notion of adapting literature to the language classroom is not new. Famous pedagogue Quintilian advocated the use of Aesop's fables for acquiring Latin as a foreign language as early as A.D. 35 (Chen, 2014). Others followed suit. Erasmus (1466—1536) used pictures whereas Comenius (1592—1670) invented a picture book to help students learn Latin as a foreign language. It is undisputed that students benefit from being challenged with language input that is slightly beyond their independent level of comprehension, irrespective of whether this is provided by conversation or by listening to the reading or the narration of a story. Four main reasons as to why the language teacher should use literature in the classroom are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement (Collie & Slater, 1990).

Along the years, the role of literature in the language classroom has been re-assessed various times and although, even today, not all language teachers and didactic experts agree on the utility of literature to teach language, many now view literary texts not just as ideal to provide rich linguistic input that helps learners to practise the four basic language skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing, but above all as effective stimuli that help and motivate students to express themselves in the language/s being learnt. This not only

because they delve into topics and themes that are of a universal nature, like love, but also because they express the students' feelings and emotions on topics that are of fundamental human value and importance like peace, family, society and which are usually never found in textbooks. The texts presented in such textbooks are usually expository with all the information given in an explicit way, words are used with their denotative meaning and figurative language is almost non-existent (Dimova & Daskalovska, 2012). Further to this, more often than not textbooks are quite "artificial" in nature and given that the texts they present are intended to introduce grammatical notions they tend to be irrelevant to the students' interests, contrary to literary texts that are much more relevant and motivating (Sell, 2005).

Literature also provides the opportunity for learners to discuss, during the language hour, and to better develop their understanding of other cultures, their awareness of 'difference' and their respective levels of tolerance and considerations. Cultural diversity today poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators. It is of fundamental importance that educators make use of culturally sensitive content when teaching in culturally diverse classrooms as such content offers equitable opportunities for academic success, personal development, and individual fulfillment for all students (Chisholm, 1994). It helps them debate various aspects of diverse cultures while expressing emotions like anger, love and fears. Literature makes this possible given that literary texts are not referential but representational, therefore appealing to the emotions of the students. We must distinguish between the so called 'Literature' with a capital "L" and the 'Literature with a small "l" with the former referring to classical texts and the latter referring to stories, songs, fables, etc (Macrae, 1994). Meyer (1997: 4) went a step further when he described literature:

The most basic characteristic of literature, it seems to me, is that a literary work is a verbal text." [.....] "literary texts are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter. [...] all kinds of texts which might be considered literature: cereal boxes, found poems, advertisements, shopping lists. And if some wish to call such texts literature, I have no objection; these characteristics, remember, are not a checklist which will keep some texts out of the category of literature.

And if teachers of languages are adamant in giving their students the ability to understand the creative uses of the language or to give their personal response and reaction to real world situations and scenarios, they have to move away in class from materials and

activities of a referential nature towards more authentic resources that are capable of giving opportunities to students for imaginative participation and a more creative use of language.

3. The Use of Literature in the Language Classroom

One of the most important aspects in language teaching is the type of material used in class. Most of the language textbooks used in schools give a lot of importance to the cultural and linguistic aspects, but very few of them comprise authentic texts. As a matter of fact, very often the texts presented consist of non-authentic dialogues which, although deal with daily aspects of life, are stale and non-motivating.

Literary texts can be very useful in helping teachers overcome these difficulties and motivate language students in class given that they are not only open to various interpretations but above all rich in cultural and humanistic elements. One has to be very careful on the types of texts to use and the levels of linguistic difficulties they present – one may, for example use literature with a small “I” with the younger students and gradually introduce them to more demanding texts as they move on along the years. Presenting students in class with authentic texts motivates them to ask more, to discuss with both companions and teacher, to learn new vocabulary and phrases, to acquire skills that are useful even outside the classroom especially when they identify with the protagonists of the text, with the situation presented, with the topic discussed. Given that the literary text is a dynamic text, it can, if used well in class, help language students develop not just their linguistic capabilities but also their way of thinking (Magnani, 2009). The reason being that since such texts engage students, they give them the opportunity to express themselves freely and to share their feelings and emotions without fears.

The literary text offers the right platform in class for discussions, controversies, arguments, sharing of ideas and emotions and the teacher’s role is to intervene by explaining any difficult words, phrases or expressions to help students understand better when necessary. Such texts can also be very powerful tools to help build bridges to lessen differences between cultures. This is of paramount importance in today’s realities of multilingual and multicultural classrooms and the urgent need that is frequently being felt to determine ways of addressing issues that arise with diverse populations and multilingual and multicultural settings within the language classroom. Cultural diversity poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators. Both the teacher and the students bring into the classroom their own personal cultures, institutional cultures, and even cultures from specific social realities, and it is no easy challenge for the teacher to somehow integrate all this into a "class

culture" to produce an environment that is conducive to learning. A literary text can create the ideal setting and set the tone for students coming from different countries, backgrounds and life experiences to discuss and share their feelings on how they perceive the world and the way they process the language/s and intercultural aspects being taught in class. Culture and gender influence not only our values, beliefs, and social interactions, but also how we view the world, what we consider important, what we attend to, and how we learn and interpret information (Irvine, 1990) . This implies that language teachers must find a common link among the group of students present in class and a well-chosen literary text can be the key. Indeed, language teachers should endeavour to emphasise communication and the practical uses of language with the aim of getting the students excited and interested in languages right from their first language lesson. In other words, teachers have to strive to make languages relevant and interesting and to find a hook to encourage students to take them further (Pace, 2015).

Another 2 very valid reasons in favour of the use of literary texts in the language classroom are that since such texts are very often open to various interpretations they help students develop their creative skills which can be very useful when it comes to expressing one's personal opinions, emotions, feelings, etc. Given that very often there is no "incorrect" answer when it comes to interpreting literature, students feel free to express themselves, give their opinion, and infer conclusions. The second reason is that once the students identify themselves or their personal state of affairs with the situation of the text presented in class, they will enjoy much more their reading as they will feel a certain bond with the characters, and this in turn intrinsically motivates them (Magnani, 2009).

4. Literary Texts to be used in Class

As already mentioned, the type of text to use in the language class is of fundamental importance given that it has to be age-appropriate and according to the linguistic abilities of the students. The students' cultural backgrounds must also be taken into consideration, together with the length of the text as well as its exploitability. At times it might be wiser to ask the students themselves to choose the text to use in the language lesson, be it a song, a poem, a short story a newspaper article or any other genre. Such a scenario guarantees increased motivation from the learners' side given that they feel they are the protagonists even before the start of the lesson whilst avoiding the risk of choosing a text that is not to their liking. In such cases it is important, however, that the text is chosen a couple of days or possibly a week prior to the lesson, allowing enough time for the teacher to prepare and, if

need be, alter the text according to the students' needs and the lesson's declared learning outcomes. It is important that, from a lexical point of view, the text is neither too difficult nor too easy so as to avoid having students feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable in the latter case or having to explain too many words, phrases and notions in the former, with the consequence that the lesson becomes too much teacher-centered. The same goes for the text's content. One has to avoid texts that either need over-loaded introductions due to their political and/or cultural notions which might otherwise hinder the students' understanding and enjoyment or texts that might be, in any way offensive to the students. Other considerations that need to be taken into account when choosing a literary text for the language classroom include also the level of intellectual maturity of the students in class and their interests/hobbies.

Having said all this, I will now limit myself to the 2 categories of texts which, according to many, are the most adaptable for use in the language classroom, namely songs (or nursery rhymes for the younger students) and short stories.

4.1 Songs

As far back as Plato, one of the most potent instruments for education has always been music (Sposet, 2008). Furthermore, the so called mnemonic quality in songs is of great help in student learning making it possible to pair words with both rhythm and melody (Penrice, 2010). On his part, Della Puppa (2005) underlines the importance of prosody in language acquisition. This explains the ability with which young people learn the lyrics of songs in various languages without much difficulty even though they do not always understand their meanings. This is also confirmed by Penrice (2010: 7-8) saying that "Human beings seem to be born with the ability to learn music from any area of the world" and that "with such strong connections between music and language, it seems clear that songs have a role to play in the teaching of the language".

Table 2: Why Use Songs in Class?

Advantages of songs in Language classes	
• Mnemonic Quality	-- pairing words with rhythm & melody
• Prosody	-- learning lyrics even though not understanding their meanings
• Native Language	-- opportunity to listen to a native speaker
• Themes	-- opportunity to speak about emotions, feelings, etc.
• Flexible	-- easily adaptable for use with various activities

The use of songs offer innumerable advantages in the language class. To begin with, they provide students the opportunity to listen to a native speaker (especially when learning a foreign language). They also arouse emotions, leading in turn to a higher motivation given that not only do we tend to remember things that have an emotional component but songs can also be used for developing writing skills apart from aural and cultural comprehension (Levitin, 2006). Another plus in the teaching of languages through songs is that teaching grammatical or linguistic aspects becomes easier given the students' increased motivation and their being "on board". They also help in teaching the correct pronunciation. But maybe the greatest benefit is that the same song can easily be adapted for use with various activities and to reach different objectives, from cultural to lexical, from grammatical to functional.

Ideally, when using a song as a text in class, it should be preceded by some form of preparatory activity which may include the use of pictures, videos, discussion, with the scope of introducing the topic and 'setting the tone' for what is to be expected throughout the lesson. The teacher can, for example, simply write the title of the song on the board and the students have to guess, using the target language, what it's all about. In this introductory phase of the lesson, one can also use a variety of oral and/or written exercises varying from listening exercises to true or false questions to sentence completion. These are to be followed by other sets of exercises intended more specifically to help students understand better new expressions, phrases and concepts that will be dealt with in the text. Various teaching strategies and visual aids can be used in this phase like, for example, video clips, pictures, ppt presentations, etc. Ensuing activities are to focus more directly onto the text in accordance with the specified learning outcomes or lesson objectives, be they of a grammatical, a lexical or a cultural nature. Tasks given can vary from cloze passages to multiple choice to completion exercises.

Another way of using songs in class is by working on their "intrinsic" characteristics. With this approach the attention is focused entirely on exploring the text and opening it to various interpretations. In such a scenario, students are asked to become the protagonists and change any part/s of the song to their likings. So some might opt to change the ending of the song, others might prefer to change specific words or phrases, others might want to change the protagonists. This gives the students the opportunity to express their feelings, their emotions, and their fears in the target language. When using such an approach, the use of brainstorming exercises, incomplete listening of the song and asking the students to imagine a new ending or even asking the students to express, orally or in writing, their reactions to the song can easily be performed in class (Guidice, 2012).

4.2 Short Stories

Short stories can be very influential and effective tools in the language classroom for a number of reasons. Motivation, literary appreciation, culture and higher-order thinking are some of the greatest benefits of using short stories to teach language (Erkaya, 2005). Short stories also help develop imagination, improve language skills, develop the students' interest and establish a sense of empathy (Yanuarsari & Muchtar, 2016). Given that such texts are authentic and are intended mostly for native speakers, they expose students to fresh themes and unexpected language, mainly because, unlike most texts found in textbooks which are written specifically for use in class, a short story contains a much wealthier and varied use of language presented in different levels of difficulty (Pardede, 2011). Even more important is the fact that a short story can be covered in one lesson, or at most, in two. This gives the learners not simply the advantage of being able to complete the story within a short spell of time but it gives them a sense of achievement and self-confidence which in turn will encourage and motivate them to read more since most students, especially the younger ones, do not like the idea of starting to read something and not being able to arrive at its conclusion within an explicit timeframe.

Two of the characteristics of short stories are the plot, which is usually quite simple and straightforward, and the amount of characters which is usually limited to a small number. These are another two advantages in class, as it makes it easier for the learners to understand the plot and to identify with the main characters. It is therefore essential for the teacher to choose the right story to use in class whilst accompanying it with a series of tasks to help the learners understand better and consequently participate actively in class. This is, probably, the most difficult task for the teacher given that not all short stories are suitable for all ages and adaptable for all levels of ability of the learners in class. If the choice of the story is not the right one, the teacher risks having to explain in detail, both prior to the start of the reading as well as throughout the lesson, various aspects including the background, the culture, the plot, lexical difficulties, etc and risks transforming the lesson from one of active participation from the learners' side to one of passive reception. On the other hand, the right choice of the story enables learners practice all four language basic skills through an infinite number of classroom activities and tasks which can be performed either individually or in pairs or groups. These may include dialogues, narrations, discussions, writing new endings to the story, role making and role taking, searching for keywords, word or phrase substitution, reading, listening to the text through audio recordings, comprehension exercises, linguistic games and activities, drama and so on and so forth.

5. Scope of Future Research

One of the major concerns on the teachers' part that requires a thorough analysis is how educational systems in various countries and in various educational institutions at all levels put pressure on and do not allow teachers to adapt their teaching to the needs of learners due to the narrow requirements of the respective systems. Such scenarios make it even more difficult, if not at times impossible, for teachers to adapt literature to the language classroom. It is especially important to establish a clear understanding based on sound theories and practices of formative assessment in the context of the use of literature in the teaching of the four basic language skills. Future research should investigate this in the light of whether the teaching of language through literature promotes students' proficiency in the target language, be it the mother tongue, a second language or a foreign one.

6. Conclusion

For language learning to be successful and meaningful, it must be able to arouse the interest of the learner. This can only be achieved if the learner is totally involved in the learning process and aware that his learning experience in class is relevant and pertinent to his personal needs. To achieve this, teachers need to create a sense of positive motivation. Be it at primary, secondary or tertiary levels, literary texts play a crucial role in bringing about active learning and arousing the learners' interest in the language being studied. The use of literature motivates students both during the lessons in class, given the variety of tasks that can be assigned to stimulate and maintain students' interest, but above all to read and enjoy reading. Indeed, literary texts provide opportunities for multi-sensorial classroom experiences and can easily be accompanied by the use of various types of media, transforming the lesson into a truly enjoyable learning experience.

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