



Chris Lima is the director of a language institute in Brazil and is currently a University of London English Literature student and a Cambridge ESOL oral examiner.

Is the rest silence ... ?

Chris Lima considers the role of and justification for literature in the EFL classroom.

Perhaps a significant number of teachers who believe there is a space for literature in the EFL classroom justify its inclusion on the grounds that literature can improve students' language competence and promote cultural awareness. However, if we stop for a moment to analyse the nature of literary texts we may find ourselves in the quite uncomfortable position of having to acknowledge that some of our favourite works might cause considerable inconvenience to our language students. This article aims at highlighting some of the pedagogic problems and areas of potential conflict that the use of literature for language teaching and cultural studies can create, and proposes an approach to literature in language courses.

It is possible that teachers who could not help feeling that there was something missing with the exile of literature from the classrooms felt constrained to find a way to justify its inclusion in the syllabus of language courses, disguising it in pragmatic attire. So one of the justifications usually given was—or is—that, through literature, students can be exposed to a wider range of grammatical structures than when the same students are solely exposed to other forms of discourse. Although this can in principle be true, the emphasis on discrete-point teaching, correctness of grammatical form and graded structures that usually guide EFL teaching and determine the syllabus of most mainstream course books clashes violently with the intentional bending and breaking of grammatical rules that seems to be one of the main features of literature.

The same can also be observed in relation to lexis. The unrestricted use of lexical items and the very creative use of language characteristic of most literary work might hamper understanding instead of providing practical examples of how language is actually used in everyday transactional interactions. As H. G. Widdowson (1982) puts it, literature can provide 'misleading models'. This disruptive use of language, which seems to account for the high value we place upon literary texts, can be intellectually stimulating and refreshing for native speakers but becomes a source of possible confusion to language learners.

Cultural studies just warm up the debate. Any time *culture* is mentioned it brings along a series of issues ranging from value judgments to dominant discourses. The point I wish to make here is that the inclusion of literature in the EFL classroom has sometimes been justified on the assumption that it gives students valuable insights into the culture of the speakers of the target language. Yet, as in the case of grammatical and lexical items, these assumed insights can suffer considerable deviation. Therefore, even if one of the functions of literature was to 'hold the mirror up

to nature', what should never be forgotten is that all mirrors distort.

What literary account of British life, for instance, could be considered a naturalist portrait of British society nowadays? It is amusing to imagine what sort of picture readers and scholars in a distant future would make of early 21st century Britain and British educational institutions and practices based on the description of what happens in Hogwarts. Furthermore, the 'disruptive function of literature is not culturally bound' (Cook 1998); it can present dissident points of view even within a target culture which certain political discourses would like to present as hegemonic. Literature has a dialogic relationship to reality, being influenced and shaped by a certain culture as well as influencing and shaping it. As Julia Briggs (1983) puts it, 'society and literature affect each other in very different ways', with literary texts sometimes registering the nature of social conditions, sometimes being at odds with social practice and sometimes being 'markedly subversive'.

Teachers' desire to provide students with a literary experience may also result in a source of conflict simply because students do not have the *linguistic, literary* and *cultural competence* to tackle the text. We are unlikely to make students enjoy a text simply because we are fond of it, but we are very likely to make them dislike the text simply because they are not equipped to deal with it. Learners need a certain awareness of normal language patterns to be able to understand deviance and a certain linguistic competence to be able to deal with unknown language and forms without resorting constantly to the

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dictionary or to the teacher. Literary competence is also crucial, for intertextuality can pose significant challenge to language learners. Books talk about books. Therefore, a lack of awareness of literary tradition and genre conventions can not only leave language students puzzled but even lead to false or simplistic interpretations.

Similarly, cultural competence plays a fundamental role in any encounter between text and reader. Guy Cook (1998) sees cultural competence as one's ability to 'break free from the limitation of one's own culture to experience another'. However, instead of facilitating these encounters, the social and political pre-conceptions of our students can sometimes

significantly impair their ability to understand and accept the other's culture present in the text.

So, shall we keep quiet about literature? Shall we ignore the richness of literary works simply because the word order in the text subverts the rules we have taught previously or because there are too many unusual words 'out there'? It does not follow that there is no place for literature in language lessons; it is just that we should not use 'inappropriate arguments to defend and define particular practices' (Brumfit and Carter 1986). If literature is not the most appropriate tool to develop a student's linguistic competence or to present realistic pictures of the target culture, it is, on the other hand, a powerful tool to help students to develop more comprehensive reading abilities. Language study and cultural awareness can be achieved through other sorts of text and discourse, while literature could be used to develop the sort of skills and offer the sort of reading experience 'informational' texts cannot provide for.

As Widdowson (1982) points out, conventional discourses tend to be highly predictable, written and read with the only intent to exchange information whereas literary discourse, as we have already seen, is deviant; it creates mental disruption and has a diverse relationship with external reality. As a result, the reader is invited to 'use evidence from the language to recreate reality in the mind'. So, it seems to me that if our intent is to give language students the opportunity to engage with literature, we can do more with the texts than language presentation and practice or vocabulary work as 'pedagogic presentation of language does not realise the potential of language to create alternative contexts of reality, it is simply language usage'.

Two possible approaches to literature are intuitive analysis and stylistic analysis. I can just mention them very briefly here. *Intuitive analysis* explores the reader's spontaneous response to the text. The problem with it is that sometimes 'learners' intuitions about the language maybe be different from those of native speakers' because of different linguistic, cultural and literary backgrounds (Lazar 1993). Besides that we can always ask ourselves how far our intuitive response to the text is not indeed being mediated by the author's use and manipulation of language.

'*Stylistic analysis* shows how what is said is said and how meanings are made' (Brumfit and Carter 1986). The linguistic organisation of the text cannot be ignored for it creates a firm basis from which students can proceed to make sense of the text and construct its meaning.

According to Brumfit, stylistics should not be the only approach, but it should help students to avoid uninformed responses to the text. It makes 'intuition susceptible to investigation, it is a means of feeling out and revising initial interpretations'. EFL teachers then find themselves in a situation where they have to think about what they can do with literary works in the classroom if they are really to use them.

What Guy Cook (1988) proposes is to 'stay within the language without substituting it for something else', i.e. instead of asking our students to transform the literary text

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in other forms of discourse, find synonyms for complex words and transform sentences of a poem, we should lead our students to find out why that particular form was chosen, what particular effect the words in the text cause and why they were preferred to others. It seems to me that genre transformation, paraphrase and glossing can even be done in the EFL classroom in order to explore the language, but only as an *extra step* after the text itself has been submitted to analysis. In John McRae's words (1992) our job then is to 'help learners to see what language is doing, how it is working, how meanings are being created, achieved and manipulated'. Our task is to 'equip students with initial perspective abilities to enable them to become better readers of literature, discover the pleasures and rewards of reading'.

chrislima90@yahoo.co.uk

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