LITERATURE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: POINTS TO PONDER

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ABSTRACT

In a highly demanding world, learners are expected to embrace the four Cs: collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Best practices in the current century's education, therefore, require tools that hone life skills, facilitate student engagement, and build upon solid research whilst supporting higher-level thinking. With the four Cs in mind, the current article seeks to emphasize the significant impact literature can have within English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Speaking in general terms, there are three major benefits a literature-based program enjoys. These are: enhancing students' scope of literature comprehension for aesthetic appreciation purpose, highlighting a wide range of the ideals discussed in great works, and developing different aspects of foreign language acquisition. Emphasizing literature-related experiences is, thus, essential for the twenty-first century education. Section Two highlights a number of reasons for utilizing literature within EFL contexts. Section Three discusses several studies conducted in the EFL classroom. Section Four portrays some activities and strategies that can be used to emphasize quality teaching of literary passages. Section Five proceeds to present the criteria the author has proposed for selecting literary texts within EFL contexts. Lastly, Section Six concludes with some recommendations for EFL specialists to consider.

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Contribution/ Originality

This paper focuses on a contemporary issue of interest to EFL instructors and researchers. The subject matter of the paper is critical to the field of teaching literature within EFL contexts, in particular. The paper documents relevant studies, and concludes with some recommendations for specialists to take into consideration.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive and demanding world, learners are expected to embrace the *four Cs:* collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Best practices in the current century's education, therefore, require tools that hone life skills, facilitate student engagement, and build upon solid research whilst supporting higher-level thinking. With the four *Cs* in mind, the current article seeks to emphasize the essential role literature can play within English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Section Two highlights a number of reasons

for utilizing literature within EFL contexts. Section Three discusses some studies conducted in the EFL classroom. Section Four delineates some activities and strategies that can be used to emphasize quality teaching of literary passages. Section Five proceeds to present the criteria the author has proposed for selecting literary texts within EFL contexts. Lastly, Section Six concludes with some recommendations for EFL specialists to consider.

2. WHY LITERATURE WITHIN EFL CONTEXTS?

Literature-based programs became less popular when language pedagogical approaches started to stress the functional aspects of foreign language use. However, the role literature can play within EFL settings is enjoying a revival, since some specialists view literary passages as rich language inputs and effective stimuli for learners to express themselves in language other than mother tongue (Al Alami, 2012). Section Two, as such, presents a number of reasons for utilizing literature within EFL contexts.

McRae (2008) states that using stories in the language classroom will have positive impacts as stories usually encourage learners to *read for pleasure* rather than merely for locating information. Interested in knowing what will happen next keeps the student interested in reading. Similarly, Shaw (2007) points out a number of reasons for choosing a novel when dealing with EFL students. Accessibility of language, true to life nature of events and characters, visualizing characters, promoting imagination, and being emotionally engaging, are some of the main reasons for using a novel in the EFL classroom. Hall (2007) also argues that using literary texts in the EFL classroom is an effective means for promoting students' reading skills. Processing literary passages can be difficult, yet worth its contribution as a rich source of language input from which learners acquire the foreign language. As seen by Chen (2006) narrative is one of the two modes of our thinking. While communicating, we can portray events as a means of reflecting thoughts or even as parts of arguments. Accordingly, narrative texts such as stories may be considered as an important genre which can be part of a composition course for EFL university students.

In Reese (2002) it is through literary texts that we can enhance enquiry and analysis skills. Through careful, guided inquiry and by linking disciplinary study to the world at large, we are preparing learners to become well-informed about different issues around the world. De Naples (2002) explains that when learners try to comprehend fiction used in the form of poetry and drama, they often raise questions relating to the issues they encounter in daily life situations. Vocabulary, sentence structure, and patterns of organization offer students many points from which to learn or to broaden understanding. De Carlo (1999) is of the opinion that literary narrative has the capacity to reconcile seemingly contradictory aspects of experience: the particular and the universal, near and far, strange and familiar, and expressible and ineffable. This richness of subject-matter and the multiplicity of possible levels of interpretation, allow the reader to identify with others.

Looked at from another perspective, Hock (1999) believes that literary texts enable learners to become well-informed about different global issues. We can talk about learning not only within the context of subject area, but also in the realm of showing compassion and respect towards other people and cultures. Booth (1998) argues that it is in stories; in narratives large and small, that students absorb lessons in how to confront ethical complexity. Through dealing with narrative texts, students will imbibe the skills which they may require when their values; values that are not merely social constructs, clash.

Taken in sum, literature represents various uses of the language-both conventional and literary, displays a broader range of communication strategies than other teaching components do, as well as enriches language knowledge in terms of both use and usage. When a student reads a literary piece, he/she learns the foreign language in context, not to mention how pleasantly literature can transcend time and place, exposing us to a variety of cultures and eras whilst enjoying *food for thought* input (Al Alami, 2013).

3. STUDIES ON UTILIZING LITERATURE WITHIN THE EFL WORLD

This part of the paper highlights some studies on utilizing literature within EFL contexts. It is worth mentioning that the studies were implemented in different countries, hence reflecting a universal vision rather than a local or regional perspective.

To begin with, Al Alami (2013) conducted a study at a private university in Dubai, investigating the effect of utilizing a literature-based course versus a General English course on university students' academic achievements in English. Involving control and experimental groups, the researcher conducted a pre-posttest, a pre-post questionnaire, and a post-interview. To obtain a clear idea about the influence of gender and major variables on subjects' achievements in English, the study included female and male participants majoring in science/non-science study programs. Based on the statistical findings, the experimental group's performance on the pre-posttest was significantly higher than the control group's performance. Speaking of gender differences in terms of language performance, no significant difference was found between male and female subjects. Neither did the researcher cite any significant performance differences between science/non-science students on the pre-posttest. Relating the discussion to the questionnaire's results, the experimental group's answers to the post-questionnaire's items were better than their responses to the pre-questionnaire's items, reflecting the positive attitudes towards literature which they gained during the course of implementation. Further, the interview's results confirmed students' satisfaction with using a literature course as a rewarding language experience. The researcher, as such, recommended using literature as a means for developing communicative competence as well as enhancing critical thinking on the part of EFL university students.

Concerned with the notion of awareness and how to promote it, Zyngier and Fialho (2010) organized a program including several literary awareness workshops. The workshops aimed to investigate what it meant to become aware. Awareness was seen to have three levels: absence of awareness, signal of awareness, and presence of awareness. Absence of awareness is related to students excluding their responses to describing the text, class activities, and/or the teacher's explanations and/ or their classmates' responses. Signal of awareness is related to students acquiring the abilities of self-reflecting on texts, and their learning experiences. Presence of awareness is related to students possessing the abilities to create relations of cause and sequence comparisons which are not stated directly in the text, to formulate concepts, and to transform the acquired knowledge; apply it to new situations and respond to the text being discussed. The two researchers as such recommended stressing literary awareness amongst learners.

To explore ways of organizing literary education, Herrero (2006) conducted a study in an attempt to raise the skill levels of low-achieving, language minority students. The study involved two teachers and twenty-two students. The literary activities were organized around culturally relevant literature and patterns of discourse. The participants were provided with some tasks of researching and gathering community narratives. In the classroom, they were requested to present, critique, edit, as well as proofread and revise the narratives. The findings revealed that community-generated oral narrative pieces were of use in terms of helping the students engage in critical literary discussion. In addition, the students' writings in both mother tongue and foreign languages were more elaborate and richer when they had been allowed to draw upon those patterns of language used in their everyday interactions. Hence, the researcher proposed using narratives as an important part of literary instruction.

Realizing that L1 and L2 teachers used related pedagogical procedures without knowing that they all had been encountering similar challenges, the PEDSIG group of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA), UK, determined to add a theoretical perspective to research carried out in stylistics classrooms (Clark and Zyngier, 2003). The group explained that the main aim of stylistics within a classroom setting was to raise learners' awareness of language use within selected texts. In addition, what characterized pedagogical stylistics were the classroom activities leading to effective interactions between a student (reader) and a literary text. Based on a pilot study, the results

revealed that enhancing learners' linguistic sensibilities had to give a greater emphasis to literary passages as action. The implication of this research for today's practitioners is that, they have to emphasize the mental processing which is an essential aspect of reading and interpretation, and explain how the elements: linguistic, cognitive, and pragmatic, act within quite identified cultural and social contexts.

Dashiell (1995) conducted a study involving a context of literature discussion groups whilst measuring adolescent girls' literary responses to modern high fantasy dealing with strong female protagonists. A working model of engagement with characters was included, comprising the aspects of role models, choices, and what ifs. While the girls exhibited a number of literary responses to the novels, most responses reflected their engagement with the characters on a personal level which centered on issues of self. The researcher proposed that adolescent readers be given the opportunity to read stories including strong female protagonists as well as compare characters to each other and with themselves, before arriving at any final conclusions.

To integrate knowledge of linguistic and literary theory through classroom activities and theoretical descriptions, Zyngier (1994) explored the extent to which awareness of linguistic construction would prepare students for producing literary interpretations. The role literary awareness could play, was both described and emphasized. Stylistic patterns were suggested as an essential component of a course on literary awareness within EFL contexts. A pilot project was implemented at a Brazilian university, considering the responses of EFL readers. The proposed course emphasized the need to recognize and discriminate formal stylistic features, highlighting creative writing. The results of the pilot study indicated that a stylistics-based course on literary awareness could be an effective means for teaching literary skills to EFL university students.

In conclusion, the aforementioned studies can be seen of use to EFL practitioners and researchers in the sense that they examine classroom contexts, enquiring; investigating and proposing. What is common amongst the studies though is the profound belief researchers hold in literature's significant role within EFL/ESL contexts.

4. ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES IN EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING SETTINGS

It is essential that pedagogical activities and strategies aim toward the all-around enhancement and welfare of learners. Section Four as such seeks to present some activities and strategies, aiming at ensuring quality education for all to learn and gain.

Some specialists recommend employing a stylistics-based methodology within EFL contexts. What does stylistics mean and entail though? Al Alami (2014) explains that stylistics in the language classroom has two main objectives: to enable students to make meaningful interpretations of the reading passage itself, and to enrich learners' language knowledge in general. According to Leech (2010) stylistics is as a 'way of using language.' When learners explore language style, they need to pay attention to the style of a certain textual domain such as corpus, or the style of a certain text or even an extract from a certain text. Busse and McIntyre (2010) state that stylistics in its most general sense refers to 'the study of style in language and how this results from the intra-linguistic features of a text in relation to non-linguistic factors such as author, genre, historical period, and so on.' Further, Busse (2010) proposes that new historical stylistics ought to be considered as a combined discipline of literary interpretation and linguistic description, characterized by being functional and formal. Some context-related information such as generic knowledge guides our reading of a text. On the other hand, Warner (2010) explains how pragmatic stylistics may act as a basis for pedagogical strategies which we can refer to as *contact pragmatics*. Contact pragmatics highlights the relation(s) between linguistic function and form, and thus may be used to promote learners' sensitivity to the use of linguistic choices, enabling them to recognize interpretation in certain historical and social contexts.

Interested in upgrading the quality of teaching/learning literature, several strategies have been proposed by different specialists. In Afzali (2010) for example, training students in asking appropriate questions while students are

reading a literary passage can be helpful. When students adopt roles of questioners, it is more likely for them to develop the necessary understanding to criticize, analyze and interpret information. The initial questions often lead to more questions and deeper understanding. It is through students' questions, not just answers, that instructors can assess students' understanding of texts. To promote literary reading experience, Peplow (2010) advocates using book groups. The book group context provides reader learners with the opportunity to work in groups for the purpose of interpreting a literary passage. Reader learners share literary experiences. Each group is required to discuss different interpretations that have been arrived at collaboratively. In doing so, reader learners not only take literary readings seriously, but also discuss the text orally, with the effect of promoting literary experiences as well as reading and oral skills. Believing in its effectiveness, Bullard (2010) proposes that in a literature circle, each class can be divided into even groups. Each member of a single group reads the same book, but each group reads a different book. Once a group has completed reading the book they are assigned, the group members have to discuss the book as a group in class. Each learner is to be given a specific role whilst discussing the book.

Omara (2009) is of the opinion that reading literary passages is eventually expected to create active language learners in general and good learner writers in particular. To help achieve this aim, the researcher proposes performing several purposeful activities in class. These are: sequencing the story, mapping the story, changing the story-using the ideas and structures to create a new story, and focusing on guided writing. According to Gajdusek (2007) literature is not referential; that is, a literary passage is not read to refer to a physical fact. Instead, a literary text is representational, detaching language from its social, concrete, and physical settings. To empower readers, a teacher should adopt the following sequence whilst discussing literary passages in class: pre-reading, initial reading to establish surface-level comprehension, interpreting and finding meaning through analyzing character; articulating theme; clarifying structure and exploring linguistic features, and performing extended activities to enter the world of the text. To ensure effective instruction, the researcher proposes that teachers be disciplined, build schema by providing information that is essential for comprehension, use questions and invite readers to respond, and spend enough time whilst performing different tasks.

Beach (2004a) believes that in teaching fictional texts, a teacher should create web sites based on similar topics, themes, issues, or genre features. While analyzing the storylines in fantasy; science fiction; or adventure literature, learners have to explore using certain storylines. Reading fantasy as well as science fiction requires that learners suspend their disbelief in order to accept alternative versions of reality. Much of the contemporary science fiction, Beach believes, addresses current social, political, technological, or ecological problems. In order to help learners become aware of these problems, it will be useful to collaborate with a social studies/science teacher. In studying heroes alongside anti-heroes, learners should examine the topics of both heroes and anti-heroes, whilst investigating features and characteristics of what it is that contributes to being a hero in different cultures and eras. Moreover, a teacher should encourage his/her students to study the uses of double-voiced language that represent different speech worlds. In doing so, students can study how different narrative versions of myths, fables, or fairy tales reflect differences in cultural models. When it comes to genre study, Beach suggests that a teacher should select one literature genre and then research authors who write within the selected genre, describing features of this genre in relation to prototypical character types and roles.

To prepare a lesson for discussing a literary passage, Beach (2004b) explains that instructors should consider the types of students' interpretive strategies to focus on, in their instruction. To devise tasks, instructors should define the purpose for each task, relying on what they want learners to acquire from performing the task. In formulating tasks, teachers need to think about an appropriate sequence of tasks so that tasks can prepare students for subsequent ones whilst considering the seven types of intelligences; namely, inter-personal, intra-personal, logical, linguistic, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and musical. Furthermore, instructors should formulate their objectives, considering the

interpretive strategies they want students to learn. The following are some examples of objectives based on some interpretive strategies:

-Emotions: Students identify the emotions they experience and reasons for associating these emotions with different characters or text worlds.

-Defining narrative development: Students define the relationship between unfolding story events and predict outcomes.

-Character actions as social practice: Students infer characters' social practices based on inferences about patterns in characters' actions.

-Constructing social and cultural worlds: Students judge characters' actions in the light of purposes, roles, rules, beliefs, traditions, or history.

-Elaborating on connections to other texts: Students reflect on connections between the text they are reading and similar images, characters, storylines, or themes from previous texts.

-Positioning/Stances: Students define how they are responding according to certain invited stances.

According to Martin (1992) there are three major points which are worth considering while teaching a literature-based course. Firstly, *experience of literature* is more important than information about literature. Secondly, teaching literature should lead to life-long reading of literature rather than life-long avoidance of literature. Thirdly, teaching literature should be about relations between texts and readers rather than relations between extracted meaning and readers. A strategy which may serve to keep the experience of the literary text present in the discussion is to begin the discussion with a text rendering. Another way to emphasize the experience of the text is to make reading the text the objective of study. A third strategy is to use a literature portfolio including selected texts. Fourthly, talk in the language classroom need not be dominated by the teacher; students should listen to each other. Lastly, students should support each other instead of competing with each other.

To conclude, the variety of strategies and activities should provide EFL instructors with an insight into what tool is required for a certain situation, and why a particular tool is needed rather than any others. Instructors' skills can be compared to technicians' toolboxes. Instructor's tools are teaching strategies and activities. Just as technicians use some tools more than others within certain circumstances; instructors should employ some strategies more frequently than others for different reasons. This, of course, makes demands of instructors' confidence and ability in selecting the most relevant activities and strategies from the range available, to take account of their students' background and knowledge, and to review teaching; a rather daunting task, given contemporary society's predilection for prescribed curricula in English as everything else is, in today's world.

5. LITERARY TEXTS WITHIN EFL SETTINGS: SELECTION CRITERIA

What points and factors should practitioners take into consideration when selecting a literary passage for teaching within EFL contexts? Christopher (1995) suggests that the following points be considered when choosing a literary text for teaching and for self-study: linguistic level in lexical terms, cultural level in cultural; historical and social terms, and pedagogic role-links with other literatures and life experiences. Carter (2010) explains that there has been a continuing argumentation over the issue of selecting appropriate literary passages for teaching purposes. Two views have been prevailing. Firstly, studying literature is studying a select number of great authors evaluated in terms of the enduringly serious task of their examination of the human condition. Secondly, the concept of literature is relative; hence attributing value to texts is a non-stable process which depends on the prevalent values and norms of a specific time.

At the beginning of literature reading stages and for some time afterwards, literary texts should be contemporary. In addition, it may be helpful to read literature written in as many of the English-speaking countries as possible. With

these two principles of selection established, the contemporary and the worldwide, we should proceed to consider other factors that may influence the choice of literature to be read and discussed along with the questions of where it should begin and how it can be presented. As the author sees it, the points and factors below should be considered when selecting literary passages for EFL teaching/learning contexts.

Age Group: A literary passage should suit the target group in relation to content and theme. A sixteen-year old learner, for instance, is not likely to be interested in reading a text dealing merely with childhood concerns.

Length: A literary passage should be practical regarding its length; it cannot be too long a text, or else, it can be time consuming in contexts where the time factor is really crucial.

Language Complexity: A literary passage should be of the *appropriate* language complexity level; that is, it has to be neither too easy nor too difficult, or else, it will be either too simple or too challenging to deal with. Language complexity can be measured whilst considering the grammar; structure; and vocabulary a text includes, checking the extent to which such elements are standard/colloquial; frequent/infrequent; modern/archaic; and familiar/unfamiliar. Generally speaking, the more standard; frequent; recent; and familiar a text is, the less stress and more enjoyment EFL students may have whilst interacting with the text.

Variety: Variety in terms of style, theme and setting exposes foreign language students to a wide range of literature experiences, and therefore, could be of interest and use to them.

Cultural Appropriateness: Opening a window to the foreign culture, a literary passage may be utilized to enrich cultural awareness on the part of learners (Reese, 2002; Hall, 2007). To maximize effectiveness, a text should be culturally appropriate. Furthermore, cultural allusion where unfamiliar cultural concepts may act as contributing factors to readers' failure in understanding a literary passage, should be avoided (Baba, 2008).

Authenticity: To expose EFL students to genuine language input, a literary passage should be authentic not simplified.

Values/Moral: A literary passage should highlight or touch upon a human value whether implicitly or explicitly, so that students internalize values for life-long skills.

Relative Contemporary: Considering EFL contexts where students seek to acquire the English language mainly for communication purposes, language frequency and familiarity have roles to play. One factor that makes language frequent and familiar is the era in which it is written. Old English, as such, is unlikely to be of genuine support to this category of students (Al Alami, 2013).

To sum up, literary selections should cater to students' interests and concerns. What is more, teaching literature in a foreign language class should facilitate eliciting learners' answers and responses to the literary passage being discussed. Literary passages need to be approached as an inspiring resource for learners' growth and education. Therefore, factors like those of language input difficulty level, cultural appropriateness, and relative contemporary need to be borne in mind whilst selecting literary passages for EFL contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

Works of literature are created by writers with an intent, which is not always obvious to readers, but structure and form hold essential keys to unlocking meaning and understanding. The instructor's first aim of teaching literature should be teaching learners how to be flexible as readers; not to see texts as mirrors of themselves, nor to see them all as embodiments of formal critical abstractions, but rather to comprehend and appreciate the particular qualities of the passage being discussed. What is more, literature has to be discussed in terms of a student-centered pedagogy, and therefore, teachers have to focus on students' needs. This perspective of learner-centeredness can be implemented through a learner-centered curriculum, which is expressed by the view that language education should be geared towards establishing the conditions for autonomous learning.

Both reading and writing skills are interconnected. Writers read and re-read their own drafts to improve them. On the other hand, readers paraphrase and summarize in writing what they have read. Integrating reading and writing skills while utilizing a literary text is therefore essential. This recommendation is in support of some specialists' suggestions. De Naples (2002) for instance, explains that a large number of people have become good readers by reading works of good writers. This recommendation also corresponds to the findings of Khater (2002) which advocate integrating teaching critical reading and critical writing to maximize effectiveness. Jabr (1998) also argues for integrating teaching reading and writing skills due to several reasons such as increasing students' motivation and assisting students to think logically. Finally, Shanahan (1997) emphasizes that both reading and writing skills overlap. Learners should know meanings of items so that they can read and write.

For foreign language students to master language skills, the instructor's role is of genuine importance. Logically speaking, instructors' role has to be a catalyst, a coordinator, and a facilitator rather than a director and a dominator. This recommendation goes in harmony with some specialists' opinions. Zyngier and Fialho (2010) for instance, point out that both teachers and students need to reflect on what is taking place in class, considering what has gone wrong. The relationships between the two parties have to emphasize mutual understanding and respect. Obviously, there is a need to have intimate bonds between instructors and students. Moreover, the class itself should be a healthy environment, encouraging autonomous learning.

As far as selecting appropriate methodology is concerned, all the approaches should testify to eclecticism when selecting a relevant approach to take with a group of students. As Carter (2010) notes: '…the appropriate method is very much a hands-on approach taking each text on its own merits, using what the reader knows, what the reader is aiming for in his or her learning context, and employing all of the available tools, both in terms of language knowledge and methodological approaches.' Carter proceeds to explain that such a methodology is process-based, in that it encourages learners to be both active participants and explorers of linguistic and cultural processes.

On a final note, to ensure that learners embrace the four *Cs* referred to in the Introduction Section, whilst utilizing literature as a means for language enhancement and mastery, the selection process of appropriate literary texts; the employment of relevant instructional methods and activities; and the implementation of purposeful curricula, will all contribute to an exciting and productive learning experience for foreign language students to gain.

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