LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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In recent times a renewed interest has emerged in the teaching of literature in the language class, and quite a lot has been written on the subject whereas, in the past, not much was actually said about literature in foreign language classes. At one time it was included in courses without there ever having been much discussion about why it was a part of the course, perhaps because its place was taken for granted, its use obvious and therefore there was no need to say much about it. Later, though, with a greater emphasis put on the spoken language in foreign language classes, the tendency was one of drawing away from literature and, in fact, it ceased to be a component of many courses of English as a second or foreign language, its prominence in the course giving way.

In the 1980's, however, things started to change in language teaching. There was continued debate on the place of literature in the EFL/ESL classroom and the interface of literature and language, so that the teaching of literature is now often seen within the framework of three mains models:

   i   the cultural model
   ii the language model
   iii the personal growth model

Of course, these models are all linked, but broadly speaking they can be described as follows:

The cultural model is seen as a means of transmitting important ideas and feelings, also sometimes universal, in the target language, and as a way in which students encounter a wide variety of words and expressions. Through this model students learn about a culture and ideology other than their own. It is also sometimes seen as centring more on knowledge about texts with not much time being given to individual texts.

With regard to the second model — the language model — some favour the teaching of literature for its use in language development. There are those who use literature as a tool to teach certain vocabulary or structures. This use, however, is criticized by others who argue that instead of motivating students this can become a mechanistic process and its use can be detrimental. They hold the view that these language activities are not the real aim of literature and will very likely detract from any sense of pleasure the work in question should impart.

Nevertheless, in selecting a given text, it is often the language teacher's wish to reveal what 'oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed' or, in other words, to confront students with examples of good use of language. Many concede that the students have much to gain in terms of language development by being given such examples, but they emphasize that the main purpose of literature teaching is to enable the student to find his own way into a text. In this language-based model, the activities are learner-centred. The focus is often on the way language is used, how linguistic forms convey literary meanings, and going beyond the literal interpretation of the lines.

The object of the third model, that of personal growth, has been termed by some as an *engagement* with the reading of literary texts, or an engagement not for the sake of getting through exams, but as a genuine liking for literature not confined solely to the classroom. Like the language model, the personal growth model is more student-centred. Its aim is to motivate the students to read by selecting themes, to a large extent, related to their own personal experiences. It is sometimes anti-analytical and many describe its purpose as one of reading literature in order to make the text their own. Students are also encouraged to evaluate what they read for themselves and distinguish the merits of the works they read.

As has already been pointed out, these models are abstractions, for, in fact, the language and personal growth models are often closely linked and the cultural model can also contain elements of the others. It would be true to say that overlaps occur, all the more as a result of the actual selection of the particular class activities.

These three main models for the use of literature in the classroom necessarily open up a number of issues. One of these is the value of the use of literature for study purposes and its use as a resource. Its use as a resource may appear less academic but is also a valid approach, a means for developing a personal response, which calls for sensitivity and understanding, providing many linguistic opportunities and basing many language exercises on interesting material, thus furthering the personal development of language skills.

Although some are in favour of the use of literature for study purposes, others nevertheless argue that the study of literature as such can hinder the use of literature as a resource, especially if the emphasis is on learning about literature, rather than acquiring knowledge of literature, knowledge about it implying learning facts about the literary contexts in question, dates, authors, titles of texts and literary terms and conventions. Those who oppose this use of literature say that it becomes knowledge for its own sake and does not naturally lead to reading which is responsive or to a more complete understanding of the texts themselves. They say that this means does not develop the skills of most of the students.

These information-based methods, say the critics, do not allow the student to read literature for herself or himself and interpret the meaning or meanings of texts. The students with good memories do well in exams based on such techniques, but also possibly gain little in language skills.

On the other hand, the teachers who support the use of literature as a resource stress that the first object of the knowledge of literature is that of personal pleasure in reading, and the choice of teaching methods calls for active involvement in reading the texts, and not a passive reception of ready-made information. This knowledge of literature is expressed through a student-centred approach which is activity based, attained through personal response and involvement.

Closely linked to this question is that of the design of the literature curriculum, and whether it is one in which a wide range of texts is studied or one in which there is a limited number but these are studied in more depth. Those who prefer the broader approach do so

because they say that there should be experience of different kinds of texts and styles, allowing for varied response to the texts and developing the ability to relate this wider reading to more texts.

Those in favour of greater depth, say that the broader approach is too superficial. They hold that learning to read one text accurately will help the reading of other texts, and that it is best to know a smaller number more thoroughly.

This leads to other important questions. We may well talk about reading and understanding literature and its place in the curriculum, but what level of language competence is necessary for a text to be read in breadth or depth? What do we mean by literary competence in any case, and what kind of literary competence are we trying to develop in our students? The answer to the questions is complex, and also linked to that of defining what an appropriate literary text is for a given class of second or foreign language learners because, if the selected text presents too many linguistic difficulties, the students will simply not be able to understand it well enough.

Another aspect which some consider even more important, though, is the experiential level. They say that the students have to be able to identify with the experiences, thoughts and situations in the text, being able to enjoy it by relating it to what they themselves know about themselves and the world. They hold the view that if a learner can do this despite linguistic problems and if the text is sufficiently exciting or moving, it will be an incentive to surpassing some of the difficulties. Moreover, they say that a learner who is involved with the text will want to work at his or her reading and will gain from being exposed to the language of literature, the text acting as a stimulus for the development of language.

When talking about literature and language teaching and learning and applying this to the students of the Faculdade de Letras there are various points that have to be considered. The first of these is the fact that the classes are of mixed ability. There are therefore students who have only a knowledge of very basic structures and vocabulary, and some not even these. Moreover, in some cases, the number of these students is considerable, particularly in the first year and in the evening classes. At the same time, there are also good students. Some people argue against the use of literature with students who have only a basic knowledge, saying that such students will not be able to understand the literary texts, that literary material will be beyond their scope and literature will be a deterrent and not a positive teaching aid.

There is certainly a strong case for this type of argument for most will agree on the negative effects of confronting a student with work that he or she is not able to do. Nevertheless, although there are weak students, there are also more able ones, and it may well be argued that the weak ones should not be in the class anyway, that they will be weak in all areas, not just literature and, in any case, will probably not be in the class by the end of the year or, if they are still there, will fail whether or not they do any literature. The teacher is hardly going to be stopped from incorporating literature into the course because of such students, though he or she will have to take into account the ratio between them and the better ones in determining in what ways literature and literature-based activities can be a part of the course. It may well be that if the number of really weak students is large there will be less time for some of the activities, as more time will have to be spent on others.

My own experience is that, on the whole, the majority of students take a keen interest in this aspect of the curriculum. A way they like incorporating literature is through student projects and presentations, working, where possible, in groups, carrying out their own research into given texts, authors and background, though this is not without its problems. One of these is that of insufficient or outdated material for, whereas there is no difficulty in obtaining information on some of the set books, the material available in libraries and bookshops on others is limited.

Another is that, when faced with writing about the set texts, there is a marked tendency in some to compile information on dates and titles, or quoting chunks out of some critical work, relying on others' opinions and making generalisations with no attempt at valid analysis or even adequately justifying the views adopted.

For this reason, when dealing with this type of work, the need for prior preparation in class must be stressed. Before beginning the projects, there should be ample class discussion on how to set about them. Providing dates and titles can be interesting and relevant, but students have to be encouraged to think for themselves and actually read the text in question, developing a personal response, rather than just producing ready made opinions about the texts, merely agreeing with what they found written down somewhere or other about them.

As well as these projects, the texts provide material for a wide selection of activities to meet the aims of the language class in developing linguistic skills. They supply interesting subjects for class discussion which, in turn, frequently give the students the opportunity to link their own ideas to related topics, springing both from personal experience and other sources, such as films and articles. The texts can also be used in many good language-based activities, such as cloze or gap-filling, exercises following reading aloud, prediction, jigsaw reading and others, like those involving matching characteristics with the characters in a play or book, or characters with speech, to mention a few. They are also the basis for many valuable writing tasks, some of which are more simple and others more complex, to suit the general class ability. A diary entry based on facts drawn from a text, for instance, a sequel, or the re-writing of a passage for a play or film script, call for good comprehension and interpretative skills as well as linguistic ability and imagination.

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