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## Including literature in the language classroom

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**ABSTRACT:** *The inclusion of literary texts in the language classroom is a practice framed in controversy. Opponents of such tasks base their position in the inherent complexity of this type of texts. Conversely, advocates of the inclusion of literature maintain that, despite its characteristic intricacy, literary texts, when appropriately used, are likely to bring forth several benefits in terms of communicative competence. This paper, therefore, addresses this issue through a brief description of the difficulties and benefits of the inclusion of literature in the language classroom. This account is complemented by an assessment of the most important approaches to literary analysis and their implications in EFL contexts.*

**KEYWORDS:** *literature, language instruction, advantages, difficulties, approaches.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of literary texts in the language classroom, specifically, in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign (EFL) environments, has seen different stages with their corresponding features. According to Nkwetisama [1], the development of communication abilities through classical rhetoric marked the use of literary texts in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This use later evolved into a crucial role in the teaching and learning processes carried out through the Grammar-Translation Method, whose aim was precisely the translation of literary texts [2]. Nevertheless, using literature in this fashion cannot be seen as means for communicative competence development.

In the second half of the nineteenth century – and throughout the beginning of the twentieth century – the exclusion of literary texts from the classroom started and became heightened, as linguistic accuracy for the achievement of academic and professional objectives became the heart of language teaching and learning; thus, as Nkwetisama, Mackay [3], and Spack [4] report, linguistics became the core of language teaching.

Spack and Paran [5] report on a renewed interest in literary texts as ESL/EFL resources that began in the 1980's. Nevertheless, as Hall [6] argues, this novel attention only considers literature as a resource, and it does not concern itself with broad curricular matters. In fact, Bloemert, Paran, Jansen, and van de Grift [7] assert that a thorough integration of literature in ESL/EFL curricula has not been achieved, despite contemporary efforts. Furthermore, this modern interest in literary texts is also framed within a relative lack of empirical evidence to support decisions regarding inclusion or disregard of literature. Consequently, many of the arguments in favor or against incorporating literary texts in language instruction spring from practitioner's evidence or adaptations from first language contexts [5] [6].

## **II. DIFFICULTIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE INCLUSION OF LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Floris [8] mentions that there is a tendency to consider literary vocabulary and grammatical structures to be too complex, and therefore, too difficult for second/foreign language students. Furthermore, opponents to the use of literature in EFL/ESL environments argue that literary texts do not aid teachers in their endeavor to develop grammatical competence in their students [3]. In connection with this assertion, Toppin, as cited by Khatib [9], maintains that literary texts should not be employed in the language classroom since they involve the use of complex structures, which do not conform to conventional rules of grammar. Moreover, Lazar [10] states that teachers fear that, because of the linguistic nature of literary texts, especially poetic ones, their employment might expose students to inadequate language uses, as certain texts might separate themselves from standard language use in order to convey their messages in innovative ways. Some teachers might conclude that, to understand and profit from these novel and unconventional uses, learners require first be familiar with the prevailing conventions of language. Therefore, a fear ensues regarding the fact that students' mastery of the rules of standard language use is insufficient for them to value and benefit from intentional deviations from those norms. As it can be noticed, the abovementioned arguments relate to the particular linguistic features of literary texts.

Another claim against the use of literature in EFL/ESL environments deals with the cultural elements embedded in literary texts. Duff and Maley, as cited by Bobkina and Dominguez [11], argue about the impossibility for a non-native speaker of the target language (TL) to completely share all the assumptions and references of native speakers. In addition, Lazar, citing Culler, states that effective reading and understanding of literary texts require individuals to be familiar with specific conventions that assist the comprehension of the meaning that is being conveyed through the words of the text. This author defines this type of acquaintance as literary competence. These authors agree that lacking this cultural and/or literary knowledge may render the text incomprehensible and lead to frustration, which in turn, might raise affective filters against language learning.

A final point to consider in this section relates to the difficulty of selecting the literary texts to be used in the EFL/ESL classroom. Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan, as quoted by Bobkina and Dominguez, declare that the text should be age and gender appropriate, and at the same time, it should conform to the students' linguistic and communicative skills in the target language. In addition to this, the length of the text also presents difficulties. Duff and Maley, as cited by Floris, assert that, although there is a tendency to consider long texts particularly hard, short pieces also present difficulties, as there is less opportunity to find assistance in the context. Following the same line of thought regarding text selection, Lima, cited by Bobkina and Dominguez, claims that there is the possibility that students' exposure to TL literature might cause conflicts, as learners' may lack linguistic, cultural, and literary competence to deal with the text. Selecting an appropriate literary text to be used in EFL/ESL environments is certainly problematic, especially when one reflects about the negative consequences that a poor choice can bring.

## **III. BENEFITS OF THE USE OF LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Maley, as cited by Bobkina and Dominguez and Hişmanoğlu [12], lists seven intrinsic characteristics of literary texts that make them suitable for language instruction:

- **Universality:** literary texts address global topics with which many, if not all, literate individuals can relate.
- **Non-triviality:** literature provides input that is not patronizing or artificial, but rather meaningful and emotional.
- **Personal relevance:** the importance of subjectivity for interpretation facilitate the connection between the reader and the text.

- Variety: literary text enclose an almost innumerable diversity of topics dealt with in an equally varied range of texts types and registers.
- Interest: because of the universality of their topics and their connection with the actual human experience, literary texts are intrinsically interesting for learners.
- Economy and suggestive power: because of their reliance on figurative language, literary texts condense meaning, thus enabling language practice through vivid and interesting discussions.
- Ambiguity: because of the fact that literary texts are reader-centered discrepancy in individual interpretations is highly possible; this circumstance can be used to generate language practice through debates and discussion.

Aside from these intrinsic characteristics, literature can have a direct benefit on several areas of communicative competence. Firstly, as Lazar, a seminar author on topic points out, because literature is socially valued, its inclusion in student-centered tasks is likely to be motivating for students, even when perfect performance is not achieved. In fact, involving learners in literature-based tasks, even when considered challenging, can be deemed as more rewarding than a fill-in-the-blanks exercise mandated in the textbook. It is imperative, nevertheless, to bear in mind the balance between meaningful and mechanical practice that a good lesson demands.

Furthermore, literary texts provide models for authentic language use [11]. One has to take into account that language, as actually used by native speakers, is by no means strict, but rather flexible and open to variations. Moreover, the language instructor can take advantage of the departures from the norm that certain texts feature in order to reinforce the students' knowledge about these rules.

In terms of the target-language's macro-skills, Khan and Alasmari [13] reading out literary texts to learners is prone to benefit the development of their listening skills as exposure to a variety of registers and dialects can be facilitated. Additionally, silently following the plot of the story that is being read is likely to generate mental pictures that will facilitate storage and recollection of specific language items.

As to speaking, because of the inherent features discussed above, literary texts can be used as effective stimuli to prompt oral discussions that are interesting and meaningful for students, as they depart from their personal reactions to the text. Furthermore, by being exposed to literary texts, students are prone to become aware of the important role of form in meaning conveyance [13]. Complementarily, certain manifestations of literary, particularly, poetic ones, rely on spoken and aural features such as rhyme and meter, which can acquaint students with supra-segmental features of oral production such as stress, pitch, rhythm, and intonation [14].

As regards reading, Daskalovska and Dimova [15] remark that "[a] valuable contribution of teaching literature is that it serves as a gateway to extensive reading which increases students' exposure to the target language" (p. 1185). One of the ensuing benefits of this exposure is vocabulary acquisition, as literary texts provide novel contextualized examples of the use of specific language items that, because of these characteristics, are more easily remembered.

Finally, concerning the development of the writing skill, Hişmanoğlu states that literary texts can be used as to promote writing practices in the language classroom. This employment has two aspects: a) using literature as subject matter for written production and d) employing literary texts as model for the students' own and original compositions. Disregarding this latter use because of deeming it too challenging for language learners is rather impetuous. In fact, after carrying out a corpus analysis of 844 poems written by language students, Hanauer [16] concludes that poetry composition – which can be considered as one of the most difficult forms of writing – is an attainable endeavor for well-motivated language learners. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, through the creation of original literary texts, ESL/EFL students can gain a new appreciation

for the target language, that is, not only as the world's lingua franca, but also as a personal means for expressing their own ideas and emotions. Thus, composition practices of literary texts can be seen as a way of achieving real proficiency in English, which, according to Widdowson [17], an influential author in the field of Applied Linguistics, is not shown through passive compliance to imposed rules, but rather through personal and meaningful uses that might even bend standard rules of usage.

#### IV. APPROACHES TO LITERARY ANALYSIS

Van [18] accounts for six approaches to literary analysis; a succinct description of all them is presented below. This description is followed by an assessment of each, particularly in terms of ESL/EFL instruction.

**New Criticism.** For this approach, meaning is confined exclusively to the text. All peripheral and contextual elements are ignored in the analysis of the piece. In Van's words, "the reader's role is to discover the one correct meaning by a close reading and analysis of formal elements such as rhyme, meter, imagery, and theme" (p. 3).

**Structuralism.** In this approach, literary texts are not interpreted as discrete items, but their analysis establishes their position within the whole literary framework. Van claims that Structuralism "requires learners to approach literary texts scientifically and to use their knowledge of structures and themes to place the work into a meaningful hierarchical system" (p. 4) Nevertheless, the readers' reactions to text are also ignored. The reason for this is a search for total objectivity, in an attempt to reach an understanding of all the mechanisms of meaning conveyance employed in the piece, isolated from its aesthetic elements.

**Stylistics.** The aim of this approach is the development of the learner's sensitivity towards literature by means of analyzing the characteristics of literary language. Van claims that, in this approach, teachers encourage learners to make use of their linguistic background knowledge to interpret the text, while judging its aesthetic value. Hence, the reader's reaction to the texts is valued and encouraged.

**Reader-Response.** Literature is an essential element of human society, and as such, it has been extensively studied through many theoretical lenses. Traditionally, the emphasis of this analysis has been placed on the texts per se and their authors; however, in the 1960's, literary scholars such as S. Fish, W. Iser, and N. Holland started a movement that, making use of the work of Rosenblatt, vindicated the importance of the reader. The discussion that ensued eventually evolved into the Reader-Response Theory.

Tugrul [19] asserts that the Reader-Response Theory "is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in a mutual relationship between the reader and the text when the reader demystifies literature and links it to his/her individual experience" (p. 81). Thus, according to the author, the analysis and interpretation of literature assumes a transactional view that takes advantage of the emotional reactions that spring from reading a piece of literature. For his part, Amer, as cited by Spirovska [20], suggests that the Reader-Response Theory understands the process of reading a literature as a type of contract between the text and the reader. Under this perspective, meaning is constructed as a result of the interaction – transaction – between the reader's background, experience, and expectations and the perspectives, ideas, and emotions that the authors attempt to convey through their texts. Moreover, Spirovska emphasizes the interdependence between the text and the reader that this theory highlights, to the point that it is the reader who shapes, or rather re-shapes, the text.

Van, for his part, claims that this approach to literary analysis "makes an important contribution to learning by demystifying literature and connecting it to individual experience" (p. 6). For the author, this approach is process-oriented, and it departs from the personal experience and knowledge of the learners to foster the interpretation of a literary text. This approach, therefore, is a learner-centered one, in which the text is analyzed and interpreted on the basis of the reader's experience, ideas, attitudes, and emotions. Bobkina and

Dominguez argue that the reader-centeredness of this approach facilitates the interaction between the students and the text. Moreover, one has to bear in mind that each literary piece occurs in a specifically set context, and every individual who reads the text will react to this context in a particular way, according to his individual and specific background. Thus, literature is linked to the learners, with a new appreciation for the knowledge they bring to class [18].

**Language-Based.** Carlisle, as cited by Spirovska, stresses the dynamic and interactional qualities of the Reader – Response Theory, which, according to the author, makes it suitable for current EFL and ESL instruction, especially those conceived under the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) paradigm.

Brown [21] suggests that CLT currently holds a widespread acceptance and advocacy among language instructors. The author also remarks that, under the CLT paradigm, language is not deemed as the “sum of [...] many dissectible and discrete parts” (p. 49), but rather as an organic and dynamic entity. As to the goal of CLT, according to Richards and Rogers [22], the approach seeks to develop communicative competence, which, as discussed by Hymes, involves knowledge of both the language system and its use, thus encompassing not only structural and formal aspects of the language but also other dimensions such as interaction, frequency, appropriateness, and feasibility.

With regard to the language learning theory under which CLT is developed, and despite the plethora of practices and applications that can be found, the principles that underlie the approach are those of communication, task, and meaningfulness [22]. Of these principles, the one endowed with greater significance for the purposes of this paper is that of meaningfulness, as it encourages the selection of the activities to be used in the teaching-learning process on the basis of the degree in which they involve the student in real and significant uses of the language. Moreover, Halladay, as cited by Richards and Rogers, claims that “only through the study of language in use are all functions of language, and therefore all the components of meaning, brought into focus” (p. 159).

An inference that ensues from the previous statements is that the principles discussed above have a direct effect both on the procedures and activities implemented in the classroom and on the choice of the materials to be used in these activities. Thus, it is appropriate to briefly discuss the features of a suitable inclusion of literature in the language classroom. Of the several approaches that have been developed to the effect, the Language-Based Approach is perhaps the one endowed with greater significance under the theoretical and methodological framework discussed above.

Van emphasizes on this approach’s preponderance for students’ responsiveness towards literary language by making use of a wide range of activities and procedures intended to stimulate the learner’s engagement with the piece. The author states that the teacher is not responsible for making learners accept his interpretation, sometimes by imposing it, but rather his role is “to introduce and clarify technical terms, to prepare and offer appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene when necessary to provide prompts or stimuli” (p. 7). Furthermore, Lazar, mentions that the approach endorses “a closer integration of language and literature” (p. 27) in EFL and ESL environments, as it will promote the development of proficiency in the target language. The author, moreover, reports that there are two outlooks concerning the Language-Based Approach. In the first one, literature is considered to be a source of motivating and inspiring activities; hence, literary texts are used to promote practice in TL. This assertion is based on the inherent features of literature, that is, its variety of styles genres, and registers, and, above-all, its reader-centeredness. This last feature allows for multiple and personal interpretations of a single text, from which enriching practice of the target language, in the form of discussions about motivating topics, can readily be promoted.

Lazar explains that the second perspective of the Language-Based Approach is “concerned more directly with the study of the literary text itself” (p. 27). Thus, the aim of the approach is enabling learners to

evaluate a text by providing them with the tools for interpretation and critical analysis. For this purpose, a stylistic analysis of the linguistic characteristics of the text is often adopted to appreciate different possibilities of meaning conveyance.

**Critical Literacy.** Van maintains that, although the Critical Literacy approach was not developed for teaching literature, it still carries importance as it aims at exposing societal power struggles; for language instruction, the goal of the approach materializes in revealing the relationship between language and power. Van argues that “the critical approach to teaching and learning attempts to undo the process whereby a premise is accepted because it is repeated, unchallenged, and [...] part of the status quo” (p. 7-8).

## V. ASSESSMENT OF THE APPROACHES TO LITERARY ANALYSIS IN ESL/EFL CONTEXTS

In the New Criticism Approach, which appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, the study of literary terms and devices becomes the goal, rather than a means through which achieve a constructive interpretation of the text that is analyzed. In terms of language instruction, New Criticism can be related to the Grammar Translation Method. In fact, literary texts were a crucial element in this approach, as their understanding and interpretation was the objective of language instruction [2]. Additionally, one particular draw-back of the New Criticism Approach is the partiality for the selection of canonical texts, i.e., literary works of renown [18]. The linguistic complexity of this kind of texts, along with their imposition and reliance on cultural background knowledge, causes demotivation and passiveness in language learners. Furthermore, the major constraint of this view is the acceptance of one single interpretation, that is, one right answer to be provided by the teacher; thus, individual responses to the text are completely overlooked.

As to Structuralism, this approach, when included in ESL/EFL contexts, also creates passive learners because it promotes the quasi-scientific analysis of literary texts, without personal and subjective involvement. Moreover, given that a great number – perhaps the majority – of ESL/EFL learners, because of their academic and professional background, are not equipped with the tools for literary interpretation, even in their mother tongue, Structuralism is prone to result in rejection towards TL literature. Since students are, for the most part, only expecting to receive right answers and interpretations from the instructor, the development of cultural awareness and language skills is significantly deterred.

The Stylistics Approach, which originated in the seventies, can be seen as a turning point in the use of literary texts in the language classroom; hence, many of its principles are to be found in the subsequent approaches. The Stylistic Approach introduces the appreciation for the aesthetic value of literary texts, which is, by nature, subjective. Thus, motivation and learner involvement is facilitated. Additionally, this approach also values the unconventionalities of literary texts, particularly poetic ones. For ESL/EFL contexts, this unconventional nature can be seen as positive since it more readily represents the structural, lexical, and semantic originality of actual language use. Nevertheless, the approach has its drawbacks, specifically the reliance on specific social-cultural knowledge for the interpretation of the text; this is especially problematic for EFL students, as several crucial elements of the TL’s culture might be unknown, thus hindering personal involvement and interpretation.

The importance of the Reader-Response Theory for language learning rests on the vindication of the learners’ role; this involves the activation of the students’ background knowledge to facilitate prediction and de-codification of linguistic and thematic elements of the literary texts with which they are working. Thus, student participation, peer cooperation, and meaning negotiation are promoted.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to connect the above-stated description of the Reader-Response Theory with the results of Khatib’s research study, developed with 200 Iranian EFL students. The author concludes that ineffective approaches to the use of literature in the language classroom disregard the learner’s intellectual and

emotional reaction to the text, while promoting a teacher-based, technical examination of the formal elements of a poem. The consequence is the student's aversion towards literary texts and its corresponding effect on performance. These claims can be linked to Van's description of the New Criticism and Structuralist approaches to literary analysis in the language classroom. Conversely, Khatib's study shows that approaches to ESL/EFL literature that value and encourage the students' responses and opinions, while welcoming diversity, promote positive attitudes towards TL literature. These positive attitudes in their turn have a beneficial effect on the overall performance of students. Khatib's findings add to the corpus of evidence regarding the advantages of contemporary educational practice that, without underestimating relevant principles of traditional methodologies, encourages the involvement of the learners in all aspects of the teaching/learning process, under the premise that an active student will be a successful learner.

Under the paradigm of the Language –Based approach, literature is seen as appropriate material to be employed in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) activities, with the aim of encouraging learners' autonomy, peer collaboration, and meaningful interaction, to foster the development of the four language skills. In this approach, the teacher steps down from the altar over which traditional educational models have placed him, and becomes a facilitator of meaningful communication [21] in the language classroom. The benefits of this teaching-learning outlook have been exhaustively analyzed and accounted for in current ESL/EFL literature.

At this point, it is important to mention Panavelil's [23] discussion of what he terms as an Integrated and Communicative approach to teaching poetry, as a practical example of the Language-Base approach. The author explains that the development of language skills is not to take place through discrete activities, but in an integrative process that incorporates learner-centered activities based on the text, which positively stimulate learner's motivation. Panavelil's treatment of poems in the language classroom involves the planning and application of pre, while, and post-reading activities. Among the pre-reading tasks, the author mentions predicting, making inferences, using pictures, activating students through words and expressions, and others. Interactive work, or while-reading tasks, encompass out-loud reading, personal silent reading, prediction confirmation, and more. Finally, post-reading activities enclose, among others, comprehension questions, meaningful memorization, creative writing, and role plays. If one considers Brown's argument regarding the fact that CLT encourages the language student's engagement in the "functional use of language for meaningful purposes" (p. 43), the Language – Based approach, along with Panavelil's description, can certainly be thought as suitable for the CLT paradigm.

As to the Critical Literacy Approach, it has to be stated that the sensible analysis of the power struggles that rule societies is an endeavor that has been traditionally ignored in ESL/EFL environments. Moreover, it is not difficult to connect this approach with somewhat contemporary and praised education models, such as the Critical Pedagogy, developed by Paulo Freire. Nevertheless, without underestimating its value, one has to bear in mind that this approach was not specifically developed for literature and/or language teaching. A connection between Critical Literacy and language instruction can be found in the possibilities that this approach offers for exploring the societal, political, and cultural reasons behind particular choices and varieties of language usage, thus fostering a more sensible, appropriate, and critical use of the target language in EFL/ESL learners.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

Though traditional approaches to literary analysis such as New Criticism and Structuralism might not provide much benefit to foreign or second language teaching-learning processes, the inclusion of literary texts through student-centered principles, as the ones found in the Reader-Response Theory and the Language-Based approach, has proved to be beneficial for language learners. Besides, it is imperative to bear in mind the pernicious impracticality of completely rejecting or accepting any teaching approach. The analysis of the different approaches to literary analysis found in this paper should not be seen as an effort to find the best one,

to completely advocate for it; such analysis should instead motivate self-reflection regarding one's teaching practice, which might lead to the construction of an integrative and eclectic approach that meets specific learners' needs.

Literature has the potential to connect the teaching-learning process with the students' emotions and ideas – with their inner-selves – thus making it personal and more rewarding. Moreover, many if not all of the constraints of the inclusion of literature in the language classroom, can be overcome with a thorough consideration of the particularities of each group of students that might lead to a careful selection of texts and tasks.

The relative want of empirical evidence regarding the inclusion of literature in the language classroom should not be seen as a reason for disregarding the value of this kind of texts in language instruction; this lack should rather be seen as an opportunity for further research in a field of knowledge, such as education, that ought to always seek the vindication of the students as the core element of any learning process. Finally, it is important to consider that, although comparatively scarce, the empirical evidence that is available on the topic, evinces the potentialities that literature has to benefit the learning experience and outcomes of language students.

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