

## LITERATURE IN EFL, THE SLOW INTEGRATION

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### ABSTRACT

Though literature is considered as an asset for students' language performance and creativity when learning a foreign language, it is not welcomed by many language teachers. This paper highlights the way forty three English high school teachers see the integration of literary works in textbooks designed by the Algerian Ministry of Education trying to identify their resistance or acceptance. The paper ends by putting forward a few simple solutions to change teachers' perspectives on literature use at that level.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, Resource, Change

### INTRODUCTION

Although literature has for a long time been part of the English language curriculum at the university level in Algeria, it has not until recently been able to play a role at high school level by integrating few literary texts in the textbooks designed for of the first high school students. It can be said that the use of literature is a new issue to be put in practice by language teachers. However, many of them feel that using literary works at this level is a difficult task. They see that literature is inappropriate in language classroom and should be taught only at the university level. Savvidou (2001) believes that these views reflect the historic separation between the study of language and the study of literature, which has led to the limited role of literature in the language classroom. This could be one of the reasons to neglect the use of literature at this level. Another reason might be the lack of knowledge and practice in using approaches to teach literature at this level.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the beliefs and perceptions of EFL high school teachers towards the use of literature in teaching the language. Furthermore, it seeks to discover the factors or sources that make teachers demotivated in using literary texts.

There are common arguments against the use of literature due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language which are sometimes beyond the level of students. Thus, it is seldom suited to students' needs. And as it often reflects a particular cultural perspective, it may be difficult for students to understand and interpret literary works. But for many scholars, literature should have a place in the curriculum. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge, both on a 'usage' level and on a 'use' level. (MacKay, in Brumfit & Carter 1986). It is seen as an ideal vehicle to introduce cultural assumptions which may increase their understanding of foreign cultures and may lead to promoting intercultural understanding and mutual respect.

### METHODS

The way teachers deal with literary texts in general, and their beliefs about the use of literature in teaching English

are the concern of this study. The aim is to focus primarily on the relationships between language teachers' perceptions and practices in teaching and using literary texts. This study focuses on mainly the following question:

What expectations do teachers of English in secondary schools hold about the use of English literature at this level and are they aware of the importance of using literature as an efficient tool to teaching English?

To collect data, a questionnaire was conducted in which 43 teachers participated. It aims to view teachers' beliefs and examine their way of viewing literature at this level. Many teachers have expressed some kind of anxiety and regard literature inappropriate to the language classroom especially for the first year high school pupils who lack a strong background to deal with literary texts.

The study tried to determine the causes of this anxiety and to examine the extent to which teachers may change their perceptions concerning the use of literature to teach the language. It also sheds some light on the importance of using literature at an early stage to teach the language skills and to improve students' vocabulary and culture. It is focused on the possibility of obtaining a set of specifications and guidelines that could help teachers design reliable tools to make teaching literature more effective by raising awareness for the need for changes in their practices and views on teaching literary works.

One of the primary goals to design it is to learn more about teachers' use of literary texts, and attitudes towards teaching literary works. The questionnaire has close and open-ended questions so the informants can include anything of particular concern or interest to them. The version of the questionnaire is included in (Appendix 1). It contains three sections. The first one deals with teachers' personal attitudes towards literature while the second one with teachers' opinions towards literary works selection, and the last section involves any difficulties met and any suggestions teachers wish to add.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA**

The results of the study revealed several strong beliefs and opinions that teachers in secondary schools shared regarding the integration of literature in high schools. These beliefs were apparent from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire. To help guide the discussion, this section returns to the research questions that the study seeks to answer. Regardless their own interest in reading literary works; many teachers are not motivated to teach literature. Their lack of motivation is influenced by many factors as not being guided or instructed to teach literary works, also by the difficulty of the selected texts in the textbook and the level of their students which does not help in using literary works.

Many teachers in this study seemed to hold similar expectations and opinions towards introducing literature in high schools which seems to them inappropriate at this level. The fact that teachers showed some resistance towards literature instruction is not altogether surprising, as many factors intervene in demotivating them.

The teachers seem more dependent on the textbooks in their teaching. Though most of them have expressed how difficult the selected texts are, no other suggested literary texts are given instead. As a result, students were exposed to only one literary text by most teachers. The selection of the text, which belongs to the non-native literature in English, may be due to the familiar context and the use of simple English in narrating the story. The familiarity of setting and culture removes many, but not all, of the stumbling blocks.

There was little acknowledgement that the teaching of literature could imply the four skills. Many teachers think of reading and writing skills when dealing with literature and neglect listening and speaking skills which also play a role in making students active participants. While discussing the issue of teaching literature, many teachers seem to be largely influenced by the way they themselves were taught literature at the university in Algeria. In literary studies, at university level, the emphasis is on an in-depth study of an author, a genre, a literary period or movement, and the student is expected to write a long research paper or an essay on a particular topic. This leads to another issue of viewing two primary purposes for 'literature teaching': 1) the study of literary texts. 2) the use of literary texts as resource for language learning.

Though most of teachers see that the introduction of literature at high school level inappropriate (answers from question 3), many encourage its study (answers from question 08). Teachers are aware of the importance and the place of literature in learning English as a foreign language but find it inappropriate for teaching language skills because of its linguistic, cultural, conceptual and perception difficulties at secondary level.

It is obvious from the analysis of the findings that there are some factors that demotivate teachers in using literary works and these factors are responsible in shaping teachers' way of teaching literature. As mentioned in the suggested hypotheses in the first chapter, teachers lack motivation, training and are relying too much on the textbook when teaching literary texts. Teachers are not aware of the approaches of teaching literary texts and the role literature plays in teaching the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. They seem to be largely influenced by the way they themselves were taught literature at the university and this may explain their beliefs towards teaching literature. Two types of teachers are identified in this case study: (1) teachers who resist all change and have developed various strategies and perceptions in order to avoid or delay the implementation of literary works in their teaching, (2) teachers who are willing to make a change provided that the selected texts are changed and training on how to teach literary works is provided. Teachers blame either the selected texts or the students but not themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no right or correct way to teach or use literary works. This is because every teaching situation is different, every literary text is different and every theory explaining literature itself or how to use it in the classroom is different. The task of teachers is thus to draw on the range of insights available, and then to develop an approach appropriate and relevant to their students. Lazar (1993)

There are many activities that could be used in class to make learners familiar with the use of literary works. Teachers can be creative and can lead pupils to be creative too with literature projects. Teachers can explore many ideas to make pupils produce their own work. An understanding of learners' attitudes toward reading literary works can also help teachers structure their lessons and the feedback that they give to individual students. Grabe & Stoller (2002).

Literature, as an area of knowledge most relevant to human experience can be intentionally used as a conducive domain for literacy learning and language acquisition, and its use may result in the literacy development of the learners involved. Bruner (1986), in this respect, states that 'literature is used as an avenue to literacy and can be a powerful way for English language learners to find richness in their own tales, to use them as a point to contact with others, and to learn to inspect and rework their own stories to make them more understandable to others'. In fact, by providing some efficient tools that could be used by language teachers when using literature as a resource the literary text could be used to enrich

vocabulary while motivating students and providing an opportunity for their education and understanding of another culture. The role of the teacher then becomes very relevant in selecting literary texts, using different approaches to motivate students, help them develop reading techniques while leaving considerable space for the students' self-expression and encouraging critical thinking.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: QUESTIONNAIRE

- As a student at the university did you enjoy reading literary works? Please give your reasons.
- Do you think that it would have been better if you had studied some English literary works at high schools? Please give your reasons.
- Do you think that our high school students are ready to deal with literary texts? Please give your reasons.
- What do you think of the selection of those literary texts? Please tick and add any other comments you wish.
  - Well-selected
  - Varied and motivating
  - Beyond the level of students
  - Ought to be changed by other texts
- Which texts have you used from the list? Did you use other literary texts instead of the proposed ones? Please give your reasons?
  - An extract from Achebe's novel. 'Things Fall Apart '
  - An extract from Dickens' novel 'Hard Times'
  - Folktales
  - Mr. Jones', a short story by Capote....
  - An extract from 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland 'by Carroll....
  - 'My Country', a poem by Mackellar...

- Have you met any difficulties when preparing/planning lessons of this unit? Please justify your answer.
- How do your students respond to literary works at this level?
- Do you think that it will be effective if students at this level should read and know what a literary text is? Please give your reasons.
- Do you think that as teachers of English we need to be more guided and trained to teach literary texts?
- Please add any other comments you wish.

