

УДК 82:37.014

Saczuk D.

LITERATURE AS AN EMPOWERING INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN THE ADULT ESL CLASSROOM

Ключевые слова: эстетическое чтение, эфферентное чтение, литература как языковой ресурс, преимущества использования литературы при обучении взрослых иностранному языку.

Although the use of literary texts is becoming more common in many language programs around the world, it is also true that in many educational EFL/ESL settings literature rarely constitutes a permanent component of a program's curriculum. Some authors, however, have suggested that in EFL, at least, there has been a move towards integrating language and literature [1].

For the purposes of this article we will define literature as all texts which the reader can approach not only from an efferent (fact-oriented) but also from an aesthetic (experience-oriented) standpoint. In other words, by literary texts here we mean all kinds of writing aimed at a reader who focuses not only on the content of the text but also at a reader who is fully conscious of the experience he/she is immersed in during the reading process. Based on our multiple years of experience of teaching literature to adult ESL students, we will make an attempt to prove that literature can be an effective tool in teaching English to second language learners, even to those with no or limited exposure to literature in English or their native language. Incorporating literature into a curriculum should not be viewed as a "high-risk" venture, as the relationship between language and literature is reciprocal due to the considerable overlap between the two. Undoubtedly, the knowledge of language and the way it works facilitates the study of literature, and at the same time literature can be an excellent medium through which to teach and learn language. The linguist Stephen Krashen in his research devoted to the issues of reading and its significance in learning a language has stated that the ability to read well in the first language is transferable to the second, even when the writing systems are different [2]. Consequently, the study of first language

literature that has been translated into the second language can also help serve as a 'bridge' between the first and second language [3].

Obviously, it seems logical that prior to approaching unabridged literary texts students ought to acquire a fair grasp of language, as otherwise the task can prove overwhelming and in the long run can contribute to students' frustration and lack of motivation. On the other hand, when students are equipped with enough language to take on literary assignments, there are more reasons than not to incorporate literature in the adult EFL/ESL classroom. Additionally, when an instructor decides to depart from the traditional, teacher-centered, fact-oriented approach to literature, students' motivation and attitude towards literary works and reading in general may significantly improve. Also, if literary texts are carefully selected, are aligned with a program's goals, and bear direct relevance to students' immediate and long-term objectives, literature might fit smoothly into the process of language teaching and learning. Below, we will attempt to outline the most important reasons for using literature in adult EFL/ESL classes.

Maley (2001) has observed that literature based activities in the classroom usually "fall into one of two categories: those that focus on the linguistic analysis of the text, and those in which the text acts as a springboard for a variety of language activities, including discussion and writing" [4]. Generally, classroom activities that use literary texts can be divided into three main categories: classical literary analysis (reading comprehension, detailed study of the setting, plot, characters, themes, stylistic devices, etc.), those whose primary focus is language-oriented (study of vocabulary, grammar) and those that go beyond the

text itself and serves as a springboard for other activities, such as communicative tasks, debates, writing or critical thinking assignments.

In our teaching experience at an adult community college in New York City we have adopted a classroom approach that consists in carefully balancing efferent and aesthetic activities that fall into three main categories mentioned above. This approach has proved rewarding both to us, instructors, and our students, whose attitude towards literary texts and overall motivation have improved.

Before outlining the main benefits of using literature in the adult ESL classroom, we have to mention the fact that, for practical reasons, we mainly incorporate short stories or novel excerpts into our classes. Analyzing a one or two-volume original piece of writing can be a serious challenge in an adult classroom. A lot of our students work full-time and do not have much time to read, not to mention read in a second language. Also, long pieces of writing, especially classic novels, are heavily embedded with historical, cultural and linguistic baggage and, even when introduced with meticulously planned explanation, may pose a serious challenge. Carefully selected short stories, on the other hand, can be read by EFL/ESL students on a week-by-week basis and help maintain students' motivation in learning throughout. McKay (2001) points out that students read and enjoy a text if the subject-matter of the text is relevant to their life experience and interests [5]. Short stories also easily allow the instructor to integrate the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), stimulate reflection, bring out different opinions from a multicultural point of view, and trigger absorbing critical thinking processes. Finally, storytelling has always been a universally adopted practice all over the world,

and it has served many purposes – it has been used as a source information, entertainment, illumination and self-awareness.

Our experience has showed us that literature classes work best when students read assigned stories at least twice before coming to class. Also, ideally, analysis of each story should commence with a variety of pre-reading and schema-building tasks (vocabulary tasks, critical thinking tasks, explanation of the historical and social context of each story, information about the author, etc.) The first reading is done without a dictionary and students read only for general comprehension without checking incomprehensible words. During the second reading students choose 10 to 15 words from each story, check their meaning, pronunciation, and write novel sentences with those words in their journals, as vocabulary is acquired best through multiple exposure and active use in novel situations. As the next pre-class home assignment, all students fill in a short story analysis worksheet (see enclosure) that contains basic questions related to the narrator and its choice, setting, characters, and themes. Completion of pre-reading, schema-building and short story worksheet assignments activities can significantly improve students' understanding of assigned texts and their subsequent performance in class. When students come to class, they are already adequately equipped to tackle in-class analysis activities and post-reading tasks and assignments. This three-stage approach (pre-reading in-class assignments, home reading and activities, and post-reading in-class), which is not novel in itself and can be easily modified according to class needs, so far has worked for us without major obstacles and allowed us to use literature as a practical medium to teach language,

a medium that can make many positive contributions to EFL/ESL teaching. Some positive aspects of using literary texts in adult EFL/ESL classrooms are briefly outlined below.

First of all, literature is an invaluable tool for teaching vocabulary. It is through intensive and extensive reading that learners significantly expand their passive and active knowledge of individual words, collocations, "language chunks", slang, idioms, proverbs, sayings and others. Although one might argue that literature constitutes an artificial side of language, and that a literary work is aimed at a specific audience within a specific social context, one cannot deny literature's value in the development of vocabulary. When applying a range of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities during the analysis of a literary work, instead of just reading it in a vacuum, a literary work can serve a broad resource for expanding one's vocabulary bank. For instance, we use literary texts in the teaching of vocabulary related to the description of people and objects. The story "The House on Mango Street" by Sandra Cisneros, to exemplify the above, can serve as a good springboard for teaching vocabulary related to the topic of home and housing problems. The two-page story contains a handful of expressions such as "the water pipes broke", "crumbling bricks", "tight steps" and others that are not only commonly used but also bear direct relevance to students' immediate lives. Through various expansion activities (e.g. building semantic maps, completing substitution fill-in the gap activities and others) students can significantly improve their vocabulary base, which is one of the main factors facilitating language acquisition.

As mentioned above, all students in our classes are required to keep a reading journal. One rubric in the reading journal

is entitled “social language”. In this rubric students enter all social expressions noticed in the story. For example, “The Blessed House”, a story by Jhumpa Lahiri, contains a good deal of expressions related to making requests, invitations and others. While students re-write the expressions in the journal, they are also required to think about the rationale for their use. How does the context determine the form and the register used? Why do the characters decide to use certain forms and not others? We personally believe that developing students’ ability to recognize and use language appropriate in a given social context ought to be one of the paramount goals of every language course.

In our classes, we also use literary texts as a basis for having students write their own dialogues in order to promote active language use. For example, in the previously-mentioned story “No Speak English” the husband argues with his wife, who, in stark contrast to him, is unable to adjust to the new culture. Since students have a fair sense of both the husband’s and his wife’s personalities based on what occurs in the story, they have enough information to draw on a write a dialogue between two conflicting characters. In class, we often have students role-play their dialogues so that they shed their own, learners’ identities, adopt their characters’ identities and practice speaking skills in English.

Also, literature is an excellent medium for developing listening and pronunciation skills. Now, thanks to new advances in technology students have access to basically every literary work, by means of electronics readers such as Kindle or podcasts, and can listen to the story simultaneously while reading it. Therefore, they have a much better opportunity than before to develop their global listening and pronunciation

skills. Undoubtedly, hearing a native professional speaker read a story exerts a positive influence on the students’ listening and speaking skills.

Another positive aspect of using literature is its usefulness in developing students’ writing skills. As mentioned before, our students are actively engaged in the process of deconstructing and constructing meaning, and they are required to perform a variety of writing tasks. Aside from maintaining journals, constructing novel sentences with newly-introduced vocabulary, or creating dialogues between characters, our learners are required to write letters from the perspective of literary characters, write alternative endings to the analyzed stories, rewrite the stories or events from the perspective of two different characters, or write response essays on assigned topics. We also remove punctuation from selected excerpts and have students fill in missing punctuation marks in pairs or small groups and then discuss their corrections in whole class.

Aside from that, literature constitutes an excellent resource for studying language structure or grammar, be that at word or sentence level. Literary texts contain a smorgasbord of language types and varieties from slang to formal and various subject matters, and although one might argue that many of them contain complex constructions of no use to many EFL/ESL learners, many literary pieces can serve as a good source for practicing syntactic structures. Descriptive narrative passages are natural models of proper tense use, and in our classes we use them as models to show contrasting tenses, for example the Past Progressive and the Simple Past. In one activity we rewrite a short passage from a story, delete all the verbs and have students fill in the blanks with their own suggestions. Then in whole class we analyze their choices

and have them compare their versions with the original. The aforementioned “No Speak English” can serve as an excellent starting point for practicing the English negation. The main character, Mamacita, expresses all her negations in English by placing the particle “no” in all contexts. In one activity our students are asked to correct Mamacita’s errors and explain their correction. As a follow-up activity, students complete a fill-in-the-gap exercise by entering “not”, “no”, “don’t and “doesn’t”.

Another benefit of incorporating literature into the language classroom lies in its potential to examine culture and develop cross-cultural awareness. In our view, language and culture are intimately related and inherently linked, and it is our strong belief that one cannot understand a culture without a language, and without understanding a culture (without the need of fully adopting it), one cannot successfully learn a language. Literary texts are invaluable culture resources as they contain sayings, idioms, and formulaic expressions, describe customs, traditions, and institutions, present beliefs, values and taboos, and culture-specific humor. In our classes we use a selection of short stories written by writers coming from the whole spectrum of social and cultural backgrounds whose only unifying connection is the English language. Those stories explore culture from different angles and at different dimensions. Many of those stories explore culture through the lens of immigrants adapting to or living in a new culture. They deal with the theme of cultural clash and related issues. They help the reader understand the cultural adjustment process and learn aspects of new culture by witnessing the struggles of literary characters. Those stories also provide a medium through which to explore, share, and illuminate intercultural differences, and they also

might help soften cultural prejudice, stereotyping and racism. We extensively use our stories as a backdrop for discussion, debates and writing assignments related to the cultural aspect of a given story. For example, in our classes we use the story “7th Grade” by Gary Soto along with S. Cisneros’ “No Speak English” to discuss the issue of “fitting in”. During a whole class debate students present the arguments for and against fitting in, and in their journals they describe their personal experiences and struggles with fitting in. Also, we use said stories to demonstrate the differences in fitting as experienced by children and adults. Most of our students have children, so reading said stories sheds new light on our students’ perception of the acculturation process that they and their children go through.

Literature also is an effective tool in broadening students’ general cultural horizons as many stories contain connotations from across the world. As a pre-reading activity to the story “The Unicorn in the Garden” by James Thurber we have students complete an Internet project and do research on the world’s most famous monsters. Students are given a handout with the monsters’ names and images, and then they are asked to put each name under a correct picture and provide basic information about each monster in a space beneath. For homework, in turn, they are asked to prepare a short presentation about monsters from their country and share their findings with the whole class. Literature, thus, through its broad appeal, can provide not only an insight into the target-language culture but, in the era of ever-growing globalization, can also serve as a unifying link between often distant cultures.

Finally, literature is an excellent basis upon which to develop critical thinking

skills on a variety of topics that are not usually covered in typical EFL/ESL textbooks. "The Use of Force" by William Carlos Williams triggers the discussion on the use of justified and unjustified force in situations ranging from spanking a child to military conflicts. "The Chaser", a literary gem by John Collier, addresses the theme of unrequited love and immature desperation and in addition is filled with supernatural references (e.g. sirens) and cultural connotations (e.g. Chinatown). In our classes we have our students, for example, make up a dialogue and role play a discussion about love between Alan, an immature, hopelessly infatuated youngster from "The Chaser" with the husband from "The Unicorn in the Garden". This role-playing activity allows students to identify with the characters, set aside their learners' personalities for a while, and practice their writing and speaking skills in a meaningful context.

In summary, we believe that literature can be a useful medium in the process of learning and teaching EFL/ESL in the adult classroom, as it fosters personal

involvement in the reader, leads to the improvement of his/her overall reading, writing and speaking fluency, serves as an excellent language and cultural resource, and triggers the development of critical thinking skills, among others. For these reasons, we strongly suggest that carefully selected literary texts, adjusted to students' language level and needs, be incorporated into EFL/ESL curricula.

Bibliography

1. *Paran, A.* (Ed.), 2006. *Literature in Language Teaching and Learning. Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series.* Alexandria: TESOL.
2. *Krashen, S.*, 2004. *The Power of Reading: Insights From Research.* 2nd ed. Westport: Heinemann.
3. *Gray, R.*, 2005. Using Translated First Language Literature in the Second Language Classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 11 (12). URL: <http://iteslj.org>.
4. *Maley, A.*, 2001. Literature in the Language Classroom. In: Carter, R. and D. Nunan (Eds.). *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 183.
5. *McKay, S.*, 2001. Literature as Content for ESL/EFL. In: Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed.). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language.* Heinle & Heinle.