A rationale for the use of literature in the English language classroom: how to select texts and activities

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Literature had a very notable presence in the language classroom under the classical paradigm and is still today an important component of language teaching in many countries. However, the analysis of language within a text is only one aspect which needs to be taken into account. The other is the exploitation of a text from a literary point of view, since the use of literary texts in the language classroom does not suppose any enrichment to the student if the «message» of the text is not considered (Long, 1986: 43). Maley (2001: 181) states that one of the most common emphases when using and studying literature is the focus on language as opposed to the focus on literature, thus highlighting a difference of objective. In this paper, I present the design of a course for teaching English language and literature by offering a rationale for the activities proposed and finding a balance between language and literature, thus showing that both approaches can be integrated within the same scheme.

Keywords: *language, literature, integration, activity models.*

La literatura ha tenido una presencia importante en el aula de lengua bajo el paradigma clásico, y aún es un componente importante en la enseñanza de lenguas en muchos países. Sin embargo, el análisis lingüístico de un texto es un aspecto que hay que tener en cuenta. El otro es la explotación del texto desde un punto de vista literario, ya que la utilización de textos literarios en el aula de lengua no supone ningún enriquecimiento para el estudiante si no se considera el «mensaje» del texto (Long, 1986: 43). Maley (2001: 181) pone de manifiesto que, por regla general, se produce una diferencia de objetivos cuando se utiliza el texto literario para aprender lengua y cuando se enfoca al aprendizaje de literatura. En este trabajo, se presenta el diseño de un curso para enseñar lengua inglesa y literatura, poniendo de manifiesto que es posible mantener un equilibrio entre ambos enfoques dentro del mismo esquema de enseñanza, y justificando la selección de las actividades propuestas.

Palabras clave: *lengua, literatura, integración, modelos de actividades.*

La littérature a eu une présence importante en cours de langue sous le paradigme classique et il est encore un composant important dans l´enseignement des langues dans de nombreux pays. Néanmoins, l´analyse linguistique d´un texte est un aspect à prendre en compte. L´autre est l´exploitation du texte d´un point de vue littéraire, l´utilisation de textes littéraires en cours de langue ne représentant aucune source d´enrichissement pour l´élève si le « message » du texte n'est pas pris en considération (Long, 1986 : 43). Maley (2001 : 181) fait remarquer qu'en règle générale une différence d´objectifs se produit lorsque le texte littéraire est utilisé pour apprendre la langue ou lorsqu'il est focalisé sur l´apprentissage de la littérature. Dans ce travail, la conception d´un cours pour enseigner la langue anglaise et la littérature est présentée, en montrant qu'il est possible de maintenir un

équilibre entre les deux approches dans le même schéma d´enseignement, et en justifiant la sélection des activités proposées.

Mots clés : *langue, littérature, intégration, modèles d´activités.*

1. Introduction

In the past, people studied a language to be able to read literature written in its source language. However, texts can be approached in different ways depending on the linguistic paradigm we choose: texts can be used to isolate metaphors, similes and so on, as was the case in the nineteenth century, or as a springboard for any type of language activity. Today, languages are primarily learnt for communication purposes. In this sense, literary texts seem to be the ideal vehicle for developing communicative skills since they provide examples of authentic language, numerous opportunities for the expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs, as well as facilitating any writing activity. As suggested by Brumfit and Carter (1986: 30), «A good language course may include literary texts».

The most common emphases when using literary texts are the focus on teaching language or teaching literature. However, to make the most of a text, both approaches should be integrated by offering activities which aim to strike a balance between those tasks devoted to encouraging linguistic awareness and those directed at promoting literary activities.

This paper deals with the development of two courses, namely *Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura I and II*, aimed at university students majoring in French. Each course lasts a semester. *Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura II* was designed by the university as a follow-up to *Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura I*, from the point of view of language and literature content. When it came to planning these courses, I had to consider several factors:

1. Whether it was necessary to cover the most important periods, authors and works of English literature.

2. This would be the students' first contact with English Literature. For most of them, English literature started and ended with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; they were used to studying literary authors individually and not as part of a movement. The students viewed literature as something independent of other social and cultural expressions. I believe that literature should be explained by considering the hows and whys of any literary movement and genre as well as its relationship to other types of artistic expressions.

3. The students who enrolled on this course are future philologists, so it was necessary to offer them a syllabus which would be as comprehensive as possible and include activities in line with their needs and interests.

4. Special attention had to be paid to the cultural connotations of the literary texts since this module is the only contact my students would have with English culture.

5. Moreover, I wanted to offer them a class model different from that which they received at school. The results of a questionnaire I handed out at the start of the course revealed that the focus of their prior English language instruction was on grammar exercises.

Many of them had not carried out written assignments. For this reason I decided to use literature to elicit conversation and encourage creative writing.

There is currently a lack of published material with clear and precise information on literary movements as well as passages of the most relevant literary works which would meet the needs of my students. As a result I started to design my course by firstly deciding on the authors and then on the specific texts and the way they should be exploited in order to teach both language and literature. The typology of exercises set out in this paper includes some activities devoted to developing linguistic and literary activities, and thus promoting the integration of the linguistic and literary approach. I will offer a rationale explaining the hows and whys of the proposed activities. My final goal is to help students understand the texts from both a linguistic and a literary point of view by exploring some representative vocabulary areas within the passages, emphasising how a linguistic function is performed in the selected material, and also focusing on the purely literary aspects of the text such as identifying the characters' main traits or the stylistic characteristics of a particular author.

2. Criteria for the selections of texts

Firstly, I prepared some concise information about the theory of English literature, relating it to other European literature and also to other forms of artistic expression.

Once I had decided upon the organisation of the literary periods and genres I would present and their most representative authors, I began to think about the texts to be included.

As a general rule, according to Collie and Slater (1987: 12), it is thought best to prepare lesson activities around the book's highlights: a turning point in the plot, for example, or a scene that helps the development of characterisation. It was difficult to decide which passages to select, not only because of their relevance to the author's work as a whole, but also because the type of language used and the length of the texts had to be taken into consideration. The selected texts are listed in Appendix 1.

As far as literature is concerned, the didactic exploitation of literary texts should be carried out by applying the theoretical knowledge on the literary movement and the special features of the author to the study of the texts. I came to the conclusion that all literary genres should be explored in the texts I would present to my students. I concluded that the passages should provoke interest, be representative of the author, the genre and the literary movement, provide material for a variety of classroom activities, and tie in with the students' own interests. I also considered the texts in terms of the relevance of the issues explored to the learners' personal needs, as they attempt to define themselves, understand the human situation and identify with the topic in relation to their own concerns. According to Brumfit and Carter (1986: 33), «what is important for the students is to be able to relate the topic discussed with situations easily recognisable by the learners, rooted in their own existence or of special interest for them».

With regard to language, the proposed exercises should foster students' communicative competence. I also decided to consider the potentiality of the text –to explore the functions of the language according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Trim, 2001).

3. Different suggested models for teaching literature to ESL/EFL students

Different models have been put forward for teaching literature to ESL/EFL students (Carter & Long, 1991): the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model. The cultural model is the most traditional approach used to teach literature. Within this model, the literary text is used to study the literary movements and genres as well as their historical and social contexts. This model is nowadays rejected for teaching language since it is teacher centred and does not offer much opportunity for language work. The language model, or «language-based approach» as Carter and Long (1991) refer to it, is more learner centred. The text can be used to focus on grammar or vocabulary in the way these activities are presented in coursebooks or in stylistic analysis. Carter and McRae (1996) state that this model follows a «reductive» approach to literature, since the linguistic activities, completely disconnected from the literary aspect of the passage, can be used with any text. Finally, the personal growth model marks an intermediate point between the cultural model and the language model since the text is used both to study the language and also to explore the cultural context. Students are encouraged to express their own opinions, feelings and personal experiences so that an interaction between the text and the reader takes place (Goodman, 1970). This model relies on the influence that literature can have to move people and sets out to make the most of that potential in the classroom.

The model I put forward mainly draws on a combination of the language model and the personal growth model approaches whilst also trying to make literature accessible to the students and as a means of improving their linguistic skills.

4. Stages to be followed when exploring the texts

It is generally accepted that, as in listening comprehension practice, three stages are usually recommended to make reading more realistic and interesting: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. Other authors (Long, 1986) speak about preparation, linguistic investigation and background. The pre-reading activities help prepare the learners for what they are going to read. It can be presented in the form of a lecture. The while-reading activities help the learners understand the text in an environment where more teaching than lecturing is involved. They might first do an easy scanning or skimming task followed by a task requiring more thorough comprehension. The post-reading activities are to enable the learners to connect what they have read with their own ideas and experiences, just as we do in real life, and to perhaps move more smoothly from reading to another classroom activity. It is at this stage where the «creative response to the text» can be found.

4.1 Pre-reading activities

This section is designed to stimulate the students' interest and generate vocabulary relevant to the passage. My main purpose in this set of activities is to create interest in the story and to make students familiar with the environment, characters and vocabulary they are likely to find in the text under study (Long, 1986). According to Harmer (1998: 70), the most interesting text can be undermined by asking boring and inappropriate questions, and the most

commonplace passage can be made really exciting with imaginative and challenging tasks.

The pre-reading preparation before each reading helps activate students' background knowledge of the topic and encourages them to think about the ideas, facts and vocabulary that will be presented.

For this stage I suggest two to three warm-up activities chosen from the following (Sánchez, 2009):

1. Make some predictions about the theme of the novel by its title and the date.
2. Brainstorm some words related to the most relevant topic.
3. Look at a picture related to the novel, poem or play we are dealing with (the front cover of the novel, illustration of the poem) and describe it.
4. Make some predictions about the topic of the book after reading the first sentence of the novel, play or a line of the poem.
5. Read some sentences taken from the novel, play, or poem and guess something else about the text by considering the information you have about its author.
6. Present some words (the most common words, the verbs in the text, the personal pronouns, etc.) and say something else about the novel, poem or play.
7. Present the students with a video recording of the passage to be studied.

Many of the activities I propose for this first stage to boost students' interest in the story are prediction exercises, the objective of which is to make intelligent guesses about what a textbook, chapter or section contains using only a small sample of the text (Glendinning & Holmström, 1992; Collie & Slater, 1987: 18-20).

Harmer (1998) suggests that by giving students «hints» so they can predict what is coming next, they will become better and more engaged readers. The moment we are given this hint –the first sentence in the book– the cognitive process is activated. Consequently, expectations are set in place and the active process of reading is ready to begin. The responses we receive may be more original than those elicited by formal questioning.

The presentation of a video recording increases learners' motivation. The use of a professional standard can be an important stimulus as well as an aid to improve comprehension.

The activities I suggest for this stage can be used to develop linguistic or literary skills depending on how the teacher deals with them. For example, if we are studying the text of *Pride and Prejudice*, the first activity is to guess the topic of the book after reading the first sentence of the novel: «It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife». I can solely focus on students' linguistic ability to present their opinions or direct the discussion for them: to connect this guessing activity with the information I have given them about Jane Austen. I would expect them to take the view that Jane Austen recreates the micro-world of the quiet environment of prosperous families in her novels.

The first activity in the exploration of *Hamlet* is «What does the first sentence of Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be, that is the question" suggest to you?», «What is Hamlet talking about?». I would expect comments based on the information they have received about the play and what Hamlet represents.

In the same way, the first activity I propose for the study of *Beowulf* is to listen to a recor-

ding of the poem and comment on the impression it leaves on them. I would expect the discussion to direct itself towards reflections on the violence in the poem, the reference to war made by the author through the use of language and the musicality it creates.

4.2 While-reading activities

The previous section of activities is aimed at acquainting the students with the story, the characters and the environment in general. This section is designed to extract the most from the text: understanding the plot, characters, vocabulary, language and style.

The exercises and activities that follow the reading passage are intended to develop and improve vital skills, including identifying the main ideas and supporting details, overall reading proficiency, learning vocabulary from context, using the dictionary appropriately, identifying functions of the language and critical thinking. These activities give students the opportunity to master useful vocabulary encountered in the articles through discussion and groupwork and lead the students through general comprehension of the main ideas and specific information (Smith & Nici Mare, 1997). As the students interact with the text, they will improve their skills and develop confidence in their ability to understand new material. Again, I have used a wide variety of activities for this stage, including the following (Sánchez, 2009):

1. Matching the terms.
2. Exploring functions of the language.
3. Providing some terms and dictionary entries for the students to decide which ones best fit the context.
4. Underlining the terms belonging to the same lexical field.
5. Choosing synonyms for some words, proposing a title for each paragraph or stanza.
6. Completing a table.
7. Completing sentences.
8. Correctly ordering jumbled sentences taken from the text.
9. Asking which characters are the most active, passive, and intelligent.
10. Noting down any lexical areas which might take on a symbolic meaning in the story.
11. Searching the text for some characteristic traits of the author or the period in which the work belongs.

Research has proven the value of multiple readings (Davies & Pearse, 2000: 93), especially where each reading serves a specific purpose. To carry out the activities I propose, the students will read each passage several times. As the students read the passage for the first time, for example, they should be encouraged to identify unfamiliar vocabulary. During the second reading, they will focus on language and style, and so on.

I assume that vocabulary is essential to the understanding of the text and is therefore the first point to be taken into account. Vocabulary is of enormous importance in communication but is sometimes neglected in English language courses. Davies and Pearse (2000: 69) suggest that to understand a text it is generally necessary to know the meaning of words. However, it is usually best not to present meaning through translation first. I think it is better to present meaning through definition, a technique that involves the learners to a greater extent and helps them remember. However, presentation and initial practice of new vocabulary items is not enough. They need to be continually used by learners.

Research in L1 reading indicates that direct vocabulary instruction cannot account for a significant proportion of the words acquired by learners, and the main way in which vocabulary knowledge is increased is by learning through context (Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985; Nation & Coady, 1988). Although aural language experience is important, written language normally contains a higher proportion of difficult or low-frequency (unfamiliar) words, which means reading is normally the major vehicle for continued vocabulary acquisition in literate L1 learners (Sima Paribakht & Wesche, 1997) and also in L2 students.

In addition to the exercises to match terms and replace some of them with their synonyms presented with every text, one activity I have designed for this stage of understanding the text is scanning for sentences where a specific function of the language is performed. In this exercise students are asked to read the passage again and pull out the sentences in the text where the language is used with a specific function. In my opinion this exercise provides the students with more effective opportunities to identity grammar structures previously learnt in the classroom. In the case of the text for *Pride and Prejudice*, I ask them to scan for the sentences where the language function of «expressing, enquiring and denying intention to do something» is performed.

It is important to study texts for the way they use language, to learn new vocabulary and to focus on the functions of language. But the meaning –the message of the text– is equally as important, particularly if we use it to teach literature. We must give the students a chance to respond to its message in some way. It is especially important that they should be allowed to express their feelings about the topic, thus provoking personal engagement with it and the language (Harmer, 1998: 70).

To help students understand the plot, they will practise, for example, a sentence completion activity. They are given the first part of a sentence about the story they are to complete. This is a way of helping them understand the «cause-effect» relationship within the story. To benefit from this activity, students should refer back to parts of the text, think about the implications of the information or comments that are contained, and consider the author's purpose and tone. The goal of this exercise is to allow the students to form their own ideas and opinions on aspects of the topic discussed. The students can work on these questions individually or discuss them as a small group. In this activity, students are encouraged to practise the vocabulary they have learnt. In the aforementioned case of *Pride and Prejudice*, some of the sentences presented are the following:

1. Elizabeth will not accept Mr Collins' marriage proposal because…
2. Mr Bennet will not support his wife on this matter because…

Other activities such as completing a table to decide which adjectives best fit the main characters is a literature-focused activity which will help students appreciate the text to a greater extent.

Some of the activities I suggest for this stage are designed to test understanding of the text. However, others require a deeper knowledge of the author and the literary movement. For example, one of the questions asked after reading the text of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus is*: «Faustus is said to be a typical product of the Renaissance. Do you know why?».

I usually ask some questions after students have read each text, some aimed at checking understanding of the text and others designed to explore the literary aspect of the text, for example, asking the students to discuss two mock-heroic elements in *The Rape of the Lock*.

Through most of the exercises I suggest, learners are shown how to interact with the text in a logical, systematic manner and how to vary their reading approach to suit their reading purpose, and the content and text density demands of the reading. They are guided in how to relate their prior knowledge and experience to the text. Finally, they learn that systematic re-reading is as important to reading as systematic rewriting is to writing (Smith & Nici Mare, 1997).

Although I have suggested four to five activities in the while-reading activities stage, more activities can be included. It depends on the teacher's goals. However, I think that to ensure overall comprehension of a text, four to five activities are enough, provided that the selection of the activities is accurate.

4.3 Post-reading activities

According to Harmer (1998: 68), any reading text is full of sentences, words, ideas, descriptions, etc. It doesn't make sense just to get students to read it and then discard it to move on to something else. Good teachers integrate the reading text into interesting class sequences, using the topic for discussion and further tasks, and using the language for study and later activation. This part of the text is where the creative response to the text takes place.

There are a lot of activities suggested (Davies & Pearse, 2000: 93) for this last stage, including:

1. Discussing what was interesting or new in the text.
2. Debating the topic of the text if it is controversial.
3. Doing tasks on the language or structure of the text.
4. Summarising the text, either orally or in writing.

In addition, I suggest further activities, such as (Sánchez, 2009):
5. Writing the previous or next scene of the text explored.
6. Rewriting the poem as a narrative text.
7. Explaining what you think will happen next.

Within these activities I think that summarising the text orally and producing written homework could be a good way of activating the language used during the lecture. By asking them to summarise the text orally, I can be sure that the text has been fully understood. By asking them to produce a piece of written homework I am giving them the opportunity to respond to the text in a personal way, considering the distinctive features of the text.

Undertaking writing exercises in an English language class may be handled in different ways for different purposes. The aim of the most common type of writing practice is to consolidate the learning of functional or grammatical items. Students write about what they read. In the approach I present, students explore the world the author recreates in the passage and respond to it; they can also explore their own ideas and feelings about each selection through writing. The writing assignment corresponding to the text of *Pride and Prejudice* is to «Produce a piece of written homework ex-

plaining what you think will happen next, taking into consideration the personality of the characters and how ironic the situation is». With this task I have the opportunity to check their progress in the proficiency of the language and to see what they have learnt about the novel, the author and the literary period. In the same way, the writing assignment corresponding to the passage of the *Rape of the Lock* is to write a mock-heroic poem on something trivial, imitating Pope's style.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the design of a syllabus for teaching language and literature to university students, taking account of their specific situation and needs. I have also presented a variety of activities which allow teachers to use a literary text for teaching both language and literature, showing that it is possible to strike a balance between activities. Literature is the perfect means for providing a theme around which to plan the lessons. Among the many activities presented for each stage of the reading process, the teacher can select those which best serve his or her purpose depending on the interests of the students and their level of English. The rationale I offer considers the integration of language-literature approaches as the basis for entire lesson plans, thus showing that both approaches can be integrated within the same scheme, maintaining a balance between language and literature. As a result, integrated language and literature projects can be especially interesting, enjoyable, and satisfying for the learners.

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Appendix 1

Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura I

Beowulf (passage: «Beowulf announces his home»).
Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales* (General Prologue).
Noah's Flood.
Shakespeare: *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*
Christopher Marlowe: *Doctor Faustus*, Scene V, 82-139.
Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I.
John Milton: *Paradise Lost*, Book I.
John Dryden: *Song from Marriage à la Mode*.
Alexander Pope: *The Rape of the Lock*, Canto II.
Jonathan Swift: *A Modest Proposal*.
Henry Fielding: *Tom Jones* Book VII: «Containing Three Days. XI. The Adventure of a Company of Soldiers».

Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura II

William Blake: *London*.
John Keats: *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.
Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*, Chapter 5.
Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter XX.
Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*, Chapter 9.
Charles Dickens: *A Christmas Carol*, Stave 5: «The End of It».
George Eliot: *Middlemarch*, Chapter 64.
W.B. Yeats: *Sailing to Byzantium*.
G.B. Shaw: *Pygmalion*, Act II.

Henry James: *A Portrait of a Lady*.
T.S. Eliot: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.
D.H. Lawrence: *Sons and Lovers*. Chapter 11: «The Test on Miriam».
Aldous Huxley: *Brave New World*, Chapter 1.
Kazuo Ishiguro: *The Remains of the Day*.