

Using literature in the language classroom: The issues¹

The emphasis in this chapter is mainly on exploring some of those underlying issues and concerns relevant to using literature with the language learner. It is not the aim of this chapter to focus on the development of materials for immediate use in the classroom, although many of the points raised in this chapter will have a bearing on what approaches and materials are finally selected. Rather, a number of thoughts and ideas are raised for reflection and discussion. Some of these thoughts and ideas should help in making more principled and coherent classroom decisions about why and how to use literature in language lessons. However, ideas generated in this chapter will not help to pinpoint the definitive, right or correct way to teach or use literature. 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 for teachers is thus to draw on the range of insights available, and then to develop an approach appropriate and relevant to their students.

1.1 What is literature?

In this section we think about some of the possible ways of defining literature. This will enable us to focus on some of the implications of using literature with the language learner.

Task 1 R

A group of teachers from all over the world were each asked to write down a definition of literature. Read through their definitions and then write down your own definition of literature.

1. Literature is 'feelings' and 'thoughts' in black and white.
2. Literature is the use of language to evoke a personal response in the reader or listener.
3. Literature is a world of fantasy, horror, feelings, visions . . . put into words.
4. Literature means . . . to meet a lot of people, to know other different points of view, ideas, thoughts, minds . . . to know ourselves better.¹

Task 2 R

Here are a number of other quotations which 'define' literature. As you read them, think about the following questions. {2}

- a) **Are there any similarities between the definitions given here and the ones above?**
- b) **Which definition(s) do you reject? Why?**
- c) **Which definition conforms most closely to your idea of what literature is? Why?**

A. Literature could be said to be a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions. (Iris Murdoch, *The Listener*, 1978.)

¹ Gillian Lazar. *Literature and Language Teaching*[1] A guide for teachers and trainers

B. Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. (Ezra Pound, *How to Read*, Part II.)

C. The Formalists' technical focus led them to treat literature as a special use of language which achieves its distinctness by deviating from and distorting 'practical' language. Practical language is used for acts of communication, while literary language has no practical function at all and simply makes us see differently. (Selden, 1989, pp. 9-10.)

D. . . . one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, than as a number of ways in which people relate themselves to writing. It would not be easy to isolate, from all that has variously been called 'literature', some constant set of inherent features . . . Any bit of writing may be read 'non-pragmatically', if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read 'poetically'. If I pore over the railway timetable not to discover a train connection but to stimulate in myself general reflections on the speed and complexity of modern existence, then I might be said to be reading it as literature.¹ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 9.)

E. Literature is the question minus the answer. (Roland Barthes, *New York Times*, 1978.)

F. In the allocation of the label 'great literature' to a literary work we cannot be making a judgement which is objective or factual, however much we like to think that we are. A value judgement is constituted by the social and historical conditions which determine our particular ideology. The teachers and professors who have the power to decide which books make up an English Literature syllabus reflect in their choices, and in the knowledge of the literature which they purvey, a fundamental structure of beliefs and interests which reflect the particular culture or section of society into which they were born and in which they grew up. (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 17.)

G. Literature, fiction, poetry, whatever, makes justice in the world. That's why it is almost always on the side of the underdog. (Grace Paley, Ms, 1974.)

{3} Task 3 Ñ

Each one of the quotations in Task 2 has certain implications for the approach we adopt to using literature in the language classroom. These implications are examined in the seven paragraphs below. Match each paragraph with the relevant quotation in Task 2.

1. One of our main aims in the classroom should be to teach our students to read literature using the appropriate literary strategies. This involves them not in reading for some practical purpose, for example to obtain information, but rather in analysing a text in terms of what it might mean symbolically or philosophically. Students may have already acquired this kind of literary competence in their own language, in which case we simply need to help them to transfer these skills. If not, we need to find ways of engendering the

necessary competence.

2. Our main task in the classroom is to pinpoint how far literary language deviates from ordinary language. This obviously poses a problem for students – to what extent will they be confused or misled by studying deviant rather than normal language, and how far is this a useful activity for them?
3. Literary texts have a powerful function in raising moral and ethical concerns in the classroom. The tasks and activities we devise to exploit these texts should encourage our students to explore these concerns and connect them with the struggle for a better society.
4. The texts traditionally prescribed for classroom use may generally be accorded high status, but often seem remote from, and irrelevant to, the interests and concerns of our students. In fact, being made to read texts so alien to their own experience and background may only increase students' sense of frustration, inferiority and even powerlessness. We therefore need to select texts for classroom use which may not be part of the traditional literary canon, but which reflect the lives and interests of our students.
5. Our main aim when using literature with our students is to help them unravel the many meanings in a text. Students often need guidance when exploring these multiple levels of meaning in a literary text we need to devise materials and tasks which help them to do this.
6. Literature provides wonderful source material for eliciting strong emotional responses from our students. Using literature in the classroom is a fruitful way of involving the learner as a whole person, and provides excellent opportunities for the learners to express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings.
7. We should not expect to reach any definitive interpretation of a literary text with our students. Rather we should use the text as the basis for generating discussion, controversy and critical thinking in the classroom. Using literature in the language classroom.

{4}Task 4

Think about a group of students you are teaching now, or have taught in the past. Perhaps you have used some literature with them already or perhaps you are planning to do so. Do any of the thoughts or ideas mentioned in the previous three activities seem relevant to your teaching of these students? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there any other implications arising from the various definitions of literature which you think should be considered with regard to these students?

Task 5

Figure 1.1 is a diagram which recaps and sums up some of the questions and thoughts raised about literature in Tasks 1 to 3. Look at it and then decide if there are any more ideas you want to add. Then think back to your original definition of literature in Task 1. Do you still agree with it or would you like to change it in some way? Why?



Figure 1.1 Defining literature: the issues

{5}We have seen that defining literature is no easy task, and that there is considerable controversy among literary theorists and critics as to how this can be done. For the purposes of this book, we will take literature to mean those novels, short stories, plays and poems which are fictional and convey their message by paying considerable attention to language which is rich and multi-layered. In order for our definition of literature to be relevant to the classroom teacher, we will also go beyond the traditional literary canon to include contemporary works which recognise that the English language is no longer the preserve of a few nations, but is now used globally.

1.2 What is distinctive about the language of literature? R

One of the views of literature suggested in the previous section is that literature involves a special, or unusual, use of language. In this section we explore this idea further and consider any classroom implications arising from it.

Task 6

Here are a number of different texts. Read through each one and decide whether or not you think it is a literary text. If not, then think about where the text might have come from. Note down any language in the text which helped you to make your decision.

1. As this is a small Edwardian terraced house with limited natural light, Venetian blinds were chosen to cover the windows. They screen the street scene during the day and add to the impression of space given by the light walls and modern furniture. Curtains in deep coral would have looked heavy, but the sunshine that streams through the blinds keeps the overall effect light.
 1. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it as the wind does at sea.
 1. His breast of chicken with tarragon and girolles goes back to the classic French repertoire: the skin of the fowl crisped to gold, odoriferously swathed in a thick creamy sauce, golden also, piled with fleshy mushrooms fried in butter till they take on the gleam of varnished wood.
 1. Just because we're deaf, it doesn't mean we've nothing between our ears.
- {6}
1. Cousin Nwankechukukere came back with a wardrobe the size of the Eiffel tower and such impressive ideas indicative of her profound study of de Gaulle, the Common Market and slimming. She had become a woman. She even changed her name. There was no fanfare about this. I had expected the usual insertion in the papers: 'I, formerly known, called, addressed as . . . shall from today henceforward be known, called, addressed, etc.' and the bit about 'former documents remaining valid'. But no. Cousin Nwankechukukere just changed her name to 'Nwa'. To me there was a delicious crunchiness in 'Nwan-ke-chu-ku-ke-re', a crunchiness redolent of fried corn and groundnuts eaten with coconut. It was a pity to lose all that. Furthermore Nwankechukukere as a name should give the bearer a superiority complex. It is a name which literally means 'She-who-is-made-by-God.'
 1. Three grey geese in a field grazing; Grey were the geese and green was the grazing.
 1. She's been working on the project all week, but she's starting to run out of steam. She doesn't feel that her mind is operating any more.²

In Task 6 you may have found it quite difficult to identify which texts are literary and which ones are not. This is probably because there is no specialised literary language which can be isolated and analysed in the same way as the language of specific fields, such as law; or specific media, such as newspapers. It is also perfectly possible to imagine a literary context for many of the more obviously non-literary texts. For instance, example G. is an invented utterance, but it could easily be imagined as part of a dialogue in a play, novel or short story. Perhaps it is difficult deciding which texts are literary because one of the hallmarks of literature is that it feeds creatively on every possible style and register – it has become the one form of discourse in which any use of language is permissible. At the same time, many linguists have pointed out that there are a number of features of literary language which can be isolated. Many of these features occur in other forms of discourse as well, but in many literary texts they combine to form a highly unified and consistent effect, which strongly reinforces the message of the text (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 8). Let us try to pinpoint some of these features.

Task 7 Ñ

On the opposite page is a list of some linguistic features believed to be prevalent in literary texts. Read through the extracts in Task 6 again, and note down any examples of the linguistic features listed below. The first one has been done for you.

{7}

Linguistic feature	Example(s) in text
<i>Metaphor</i>	The frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling (B) To run out of steam/her mind isn't working (G)
<i>Simile</i>	
<i>Assonance</i> (repetition of vowel sounds)	
<i>Alliteration</i> (repetition of consonants)	
<i>Repetition of word or phrase</i>	
<i>Unusual syntactic patterns</i> (e.g. reversing	

the order of subject and verb)	
<i>Double or multiple meaning of a word</i>	
<i>Poeticisms</i> (poetic lexis)	
<i>Mixing of styles/ registers</i>	

We have already said that literature does not constitute a particular type of language in itself, but that it may reveal a higher incidence of certain kinds of linguistic features which are tightly patterned in the text. The features listed in Task 7 are generally considered to be among those which tend to predominate in literary texts. On the other hand, we have also seen that they can be found in other forms of discourse as well, for example:

- metaphors and similes are used in everyday colloquial speech;
- assonance and alliteration can be found in children's rhymes and advertising jingles.

Task 8 Ñ

Look again at the list of linguistic features we considered in Task 7. Next to each one write down any form of discourse, other than literature, in which you think you might find this feature.³

{8} In this section we have explored the notion that literary language is relative rather than absolute, in that certain texts or parts of a text may exhibit more of those linguistic features associated with literature than others (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). Literary language is therefore not completely separate from other forms of language. This obviously has some implications for the use of literature in the language classroom. Think about your views on this as you complete the statements below.

Task 9 Ñ

Read the statements below and complete them by choosing (a) or (b). according to your views on literary language and teaching.

1. Since literary language is not completely different or separate from other kinds of language
 - a) there is no real point in using literature with language students.

b) studying literary texts can help to improve students' overall knowledge of English.

1. By contrasting literary texts with other forms of discourse

a) the superiority of literary language can be demonstrated.

b) students can be sensitised to the wide range of styles in English and the different purposes for which they can be used.

1. Reading literary texts

a) will help our students to understand and appreciate multiple levels of meaning, metaphors and phonological patterning in many other types of texts.

b) is a limited skill which does not transfer easily to the reading of other types of texts.

1. In order to appreciate a literary text

a) students will need some assistance in understanding and analysing the linguistic features which make up a text.

b) imagination and intuition are all that are needed.

1.3 The reader and the text

In the previous section we concentrated on looking at the literary text and on the extent to which there are objective properties of literary language which clearly differentiate literature from other forms of discourse. In this section we transfer our attention to the reader of the text, which for the purposes of this book is usually the student of English. Below are two examples of ways in which the reader's experience has a bearing on the way a text will be interpreted.

{9}Task 10Ñ

Read both examples and note down any implications for teachers using literature in the language classroom.

Example 1: From a university study

In 'Cultural Knowledge and Reading' by M. S. Steffensen and C. JoagDev (Alderson and Urquhart, 1984, p. 53) a study conducted at the University of Wisconsin is described. The study examined the way in which even highly proficient readers of English process texts when reading. Subjects from India and the United States were asked to recall two parallel texts describing Indian and American weddings. The information they recalled was then analysed for the amount recalled and the types of errors made, in order to ascertain whether cultural background made a difference.

From this analysis it was concluded that reading comprehension is a function of cultural background knowledge. If readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer, they easily understand what is said in the text and also make the necessary inferences about what is implicit, rather than stated. By schemata was meant the abstract cognitive structures which incorporate generalised knowledge about objects and events. For example, the schemata concerning a wedding might include knowledge about the roles of bride and groom and other family members, what clothing is traditionally worn, who is invited, where the wedding is held, what rituals form part of the ceremony and so on. Obviously, these schemata will differ cross-culturally.

Example 2: From two book reviews

The following are two different opinions of Mrs Ramsay, a character in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf (published May 1927). The novel was reviewed in July 1927 by Conrad Aiken, an American novelist and poet (quoted in Majumdar and McLaurin). In his review Aiken admired Woolf's bold experimental technique, but he described her novels as having an 'odd and delicious air of parochialism, as of some small village-world, as bright and vivid and perfect in its tininess as a miniature: a small complete world which time has somehow missed'. He then went on to describe all Virginia Woolf's female characters, including Mrs Ramsay, as '... the creatures of seclusion, the creatures of shelter; they are exquisite beings, so perfectly and elaborately adapted to their environment that they have taken on something of the roundness and perfection of works of art'.

In 1975 Barbara Bellow Watson, a feminist literary critic, said this of Mrs Ramsay: 'Because Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is a domestic, {10} nurturing woman, her figure may not be immediately recognized as the powerful feminist statement it is.' (quoted in M. Evans, 1982, p. 405).

Task 11

What different views of Mrs Ramsay are being expressed by the two reviewers? Can you suggest any reasons for this? Do you think this has any implications for using literature with the language learner?

In both of the examples above, it was implied that the meaning of a text can never be fixed or frozen, but that different readers of a text make sense of it in their own way. As Selden (1989, p. 79) puts it, readers can be free to enter a text from any direction, but there is no correct route. Below are a few factors which may be important in influencing, or even determining, the interpretation that readers make of a literary text:⁴

- the historical period in which the reader is living;
- the class/social position of the reader;
- the reader's religious beliefs.

Task 12 Ñ

- a) What other factors could you add to this list?
- b) Now decide which of the factors listed above, and the ones you may have added, might be the most important in influencing the interpretation that your own students might make of a literary text. Why?

Task 13 Ñ

We have just suggested that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed. But this view can be problematic for some teachers and students. Look at these possible objections to the suggestion that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed. Think about your own response to the objections.

- A. It is all very well to argue that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed, but try

telling that to my students! They insist that there is one way of understanding a text, and that I must know what it is. My refusal to provide this interpretation is seen as mean and wilful. I actually think my students have a point, since in their exams they are expected to come up with one particular interpretation and I doubt if variations on this would be acceptable.

Can you identify with the teacher's objections above? Can you think of any ways of overcoming the problems she describes?

{11}

B. If we accept that there is no fixed meaning to a literary text, are we then suggesting that any interpretation is valid? Surely the danger of this view is that we are then opening the way to accepting all and every interpretation of a text, however unlikely or implausible it may seem to us.

Do you think we should accept any interpretation of a text that our students offer us? Why? If we only find certain interpretations acceptable, what criteria do we use to decide what is acceptable or not?

In this section we have explored the notion that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed, but is manufactured by the reader. Individual readers make sense of texts in very different ways, depending on the society they live in and their personal psychology.

Task 14. Ñ

What implications do you think this might have for the kinds of tasks and activities we use to exploit literary texts with the language learner?

1.4 Literary competence and the language classroom

In Section 1.3 we considered the notion that the reader of a literary text is crucial in assigning meaning to the text. It was suggested that a great variety of factors might influence the meaning that a reader confers on a text, ranging from the individual psychology of readers to the social and political milieu in which they live. One factor which may be relevant to language teachers wishing to use literature in their lessons is the concept of 'literary competence'. This is something we will consider more fully in this section. But first read the two texts below and answer the questions which follow them.

TEXT A



{12}TEXT B

first . . .
a couple of security choppers,
then . . .
the American presidential helicopter
then...
two more military craft,
then . . .
the presidential helicopter (onitswayback
from DEPOSITING THE PRESIDENT),
and finally . . .
more
military
overflights⁵

Task 15

- a) In what contexts/where would you expect to find Text A and Text B?
- b) Do you think there is any difference in meaning between the texts?

Task 16

Before reading the following text, think about these questions:

- a) What is 'literary competence'?
- b) How important is it for language teachers and students?

Most language teachers are familiar with Chomsky's notion of 'grammatical competence'. This is the idea that all speakers of any language possess an internalised grammar which allows them to produce and understand utterances which they may not have heard before, provided that these utterances conform to the grammatical rules of the language they are speaking. In the same way, some theorists, in particular Culler, have argued that effective readers of a literary text possess 'literary competence', in that they have an implicit understanding of, and familiarity with, certain conventions which allow them to take the words on the page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meanings. For example, when you were looking at the texts above - one a simple sentence taken at random from a newspaper and the other a rewriting of the same sentence as if it were a poem - the chances are that their form on the page cued you in to different ways of responding to them. Perhaps you treated the newspaper sentence in a rather objective way, simply using it to gain certain facts. On the other hand with the 'poem' sentence, you may have assigned certain meanings to it which had remained latent or unexplored in the newspaper text. For example, you might have read it as an ironic comment on the elaborate {13} security surrounding a presidential visit. If so, you were implicitly drawing on certain conventions about how a poem is to be read and understood. And such conventions of interpretation apply equally well to other literary genres such as the novel, short stories and plays.

What exactly are these conventions which go towards making up a reader's literary competence? Defining them is no easy task. In very broad terms, it has been said that we are reading something as literature when we are interested in the 'general state of affairs' to which it refers rather than its pragmatic function in the real world (Brumfit and Carter, 1986 p. 16). Thus, when reading a newspaper article we expect it to be verifiable with reference to a world of facts, whereas when reading literary texts we are interested in what Brumfit has described as metaphorical or symbolic meanings which 'illuminate our self-awareness' (Brumfit, Carter and Walker, 1989, p. 27). More precisely, Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics* has attempted to pinpoint certain literary conventions which operate for particular genres, for example when reading a novel competent readers are able to follow the plot and recognise certain themes. (See 'Poetics of the Novel' in Culler, 1975, p. 189.) A skilled reader might also recognise how themes in the plot may be reflected by themes in the sub-plot, how particular characters come to embody certain values or attitudes, how the narration is shaped by a particular point of view, and so on. While it is extremely difficult to itemise all the skills that go towards making up 'literary competence', it is important for teachers to identify at least some of the more important skills which make up literary competence.

One reason for this is that too often when reading literature, students are expected, as if by osmosis, to acquire a kind of competence in reading literature. Teachers are able to recognise this competence when they see it (for example in an exam essay about a set book) but just what its components are remains mysterious to teachers and students alike. Far better for all would be an explicit and public statement of what skills and sub-skills students need to acquire as components of 'literary competence'. Depending on the nature of the course and the type of students involved these might include anything from recognising and appreciating a full range of genres (from sonnets to allegories) to simply following the plot of a short story. But by drawing

up an explicit list of these skills, teachers would be able to plan their materials and courses with a clearer goal in mind and students would have clearer procedures and techniques for dealing with literary texts.

So just how important is it, for teachers using literature with the language learner, that students acquire 'literary competence'? This surely depends on the purpose for which the literature is being used. A useful distinction here is the one that has been made between the study of literature and the use of literature as a resource for language teaching (Maley, *ELT Documents*: 130, p. 10).

{14}The study of literature makes literature itself the content or subject of a language course, while the use of literature as a resource draws on literature as one source among many different kinds of texts for promoting interesting language activities. Clearly, if it is the study of literature which is our aim then developing the 'literary competence' of our students is crucial. This, for example, might be the case for a group of learners at tertiary level. On the other hand, if we wish to use literature as a resource, then we may not aim to teach 'literary competence' but it is possible that our students will begin to acquire it through their exposure to literary texts. This might be the case if we are simply using literature as a resource on an occasional basis with our students, for example the use of a poem now and again with a class of adult learners. We should not expect such students to develop literary competence without deliberately developing and using tasks and activities which help them to do so.

Task 17 Ñ

You are teaching a general English class. As part of their course, your learners are required to read and study a play on which they will be tested at the end of the year. Although your aim is to teach language, not literature, it is still important for your learners to begin to develop the necessary competence to understand and interpret a play. What specific literary skills do you think they need in order to be able to do this? Note down any skills connected with understanding and interpreting a play that you would like your learners to acquire over the year.

1.5 Why use literature in the language classroom?

In this chapter we have been considering some of the issues underlying the use of literature with the language learner. This leads inevitably to the question of why we should use literature in the language classroom.

Task 18

Below is a list of reasons for using literature with the language learner. Think about which reasons are the most important. List your reasons in order of importance.

Literature should be used with students because:

- it is very motivating
- it is authentic material
- it has general educational value
- {15}– it is found in many syllabuses
- it helps students to understand another culture

- it is a stimulus for language acquisition
- it develops students' interpretative abilities
- students enjoy it and it is fun
- it is highly valued and has a high status
- it expands students' language awareness
- it encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings

Are there any other reasons for using literature that you want to add to this list?

Task 19

In the previous task you ranked reasons for using literature with the language learner in order of importance. The text which follows discusses some of these reasons in a little more depth. Read through the text, and then decide whether you would still rank the reasons for using literature in the way that you did.

Examining the reasons for using literature

MOTIVATING MATERIAL

In many countries around the world, literature is highly valued. For this reason, students of English may experience a real sense of achievement at tackling literary materials in the classroom. If students are familiar with literature in their own language, then studying some literature in English can provide an interesting and thought-provoking point of comparison. This may apply equally well if students come from a culture with a rich oral tradition, where the body of written literature is fairly restricted. Asking students to retell short stories from their own culture, for example, before getting them to read an authentic story in English on a similar theme, could be highly motivating.

Literature exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language. A good novel or short story may be particularly gripping in that it involves students in the suspense of unravelling the plot. This involvement may be more absorbing for students than the pseudo-narratives frequently found in course books. A play may engage students in complicated adult dilemmas. A poem may elicit a powerful emotional response from students. If the materials are carefully chosen, students will feel that what they do in the classroom is relevant and meaningful to their own lives.

{16} ACCESS TO CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Literature can provide students with access to the culture of the people whose language they are studying. But this is an area of some complexity. To begin with, the relationship between a culture and its literature is not at all simple, since few novels or poems could claim to be a purely factual documentation of their society. Some novels, short stories and plays may achieve the illusion of representing reality, but they are, in the end, works of fiction. It has been argued that poetry has possibly an even more indirect link with the 'real world' since it creates its meaning by an orientation towards language itself (Widdowson, 1984, p. 149).

Secondly, if we do assume that a literary text in some way 'reflects' its culture, then exactly what aspect of that culture is being mirrored and how reliably? There is a danger that students

will fall into the fallacy of assuming that a novel, for example, represents the totality of a society, when in fact it is a highly atypical account of one particular milieu during a specific historical period. And if we are considering the issue of how far a literary work genuinely represents its culture, then we are inevitably drawn into the question of how culture is defined. Is our definition to be an anthropological one in which culture is defined loosely as the values, traditions and social practices of a particular group – which are then revealed in the literary text? Or do we define culture as the discernment and knowledge traditionally possessed by the well-educated, enlightened and cultivated native speaker which is passed on in 'good literature'? What then is the place of 'popular culture' which may in fact be of greater interest to many of our learners?

A further issue to consider is that English is now used globally as a first, second and foreign language.⁶ How far the language can be separated from culture is a difficult and intriguing question. Literary texts in English reflect the rich and fascinating diversities of our world. They are written by authors living in many different countries and widely divergent cultures. By exposing our students to literature in English, it seems that we should be asking them to think about the range of cultures from which literature in English is produced. But frequently, the teaching of literature is identified with the imposition of particular imperialistic values. Chris Searle has described how in the Caribbean, students of British literature had the feeling that 'they had to pit the world and the people they knew around them against a barrage of hostile, alienated knowledge which bore no relation to the reality they saw around them' (Searle, 1984, p. 17). And writing of literature teaching in Kenyan schools, Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes how Kenyan school children are confronted 'with a distorted image of themselves and of their history as reflected in European imperialist literature' (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 225).

{17}It can be argued that reading literature in English does encourage students to become broadly aware of the social, political and historical events which form the background to a particular play or novel. At the same time, literature does seem to provide a way of contextualising how a member of a particular society might behave or react in a specific situation. A description of a farm in the outback, for example, in a short story by an Australian author, might familiarise students with the typical scenery and social structures to be expected in such a setting. More interestingly, it could provide them with insights into the possible relationships, emotions and attitudes of the inhabitants of the farm. In other words, using literature with our students may enable them to gain useful and often surprising perceptions about how the members of a society might describe or evaluate their experiences. But as this description is very likely to be only a partial one, we should encourage students to treat it critically. In fact, our response to the cultural aspect of literature should always be a critical one, so that the underlying cultural and ideological assumptions in the texts are not merely accepted and reinforced, but are questioned, evaluated and, if necessary, subverted.⁷

ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In many countries around the world students have fairly limited access to spoken English, and written English often takes on primary importance for stimulating language acquisition. Literature may provide a particularly appropriate way of stimulating this acquisition, as it provides meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language. Obviously, at lower levels, students may be unable to cope on their own with an authentic novel

Within the classroom itself, the use of literary texts is often a particularly successful way of promoting activities where students need to share their feelings and opinions, such as discussions and groupwork. This is because literature is very rich in multiple levels of meaning. Focussing on a task which demands that students express their own personal responses to these multiple levels of meaning can only serve to accelerate the students' acquisition of language. Acquisition may also be accelerated because the overall context for processing the new language is so striking. Take, for example, a dramatised play reading with a group of {18} intermediate learners. While reading an extract from the play on their own, they may find themselves unfamiliar with some of the vocabulary in the extract. But by listening to the extract read aloud by the teacher, or better still acted out on cassette, they may be able to hazard a useful guess as to the meaning of a new word; a guess facilitated by their understanding of the relationship between the speakers and the intonation they use to express this. Or, take a group of children who have only an elementary grasp of English. Asking them to read a simple poem aloud, possibly accompanied by gestures or mime, may be an effective way of helping them to internalise vocabulary, grammar patterns or even intonation.

As we have seen in Section 1.2 one of the debates centred around literature teaching in the language classroom is whether literary language is somehow different from other forms of discourse in that it breaks the more usual rules of syntax, collocation and even cohesion. This seems to be particularly true of poetry.⁸ Teachers often express concern that in using literature with our students, we are exposing them to ‘wrong’ uses of language. Let us consider these examples which seem to break, or at least bend, the usual rules and patterns we may be trying to teach:

- In Example A the abstract noun grief replaces what is usually a noun denoting a time period, like day or month. In Example B ashes are described as growing – an unusual collocation, and one it is unlikely students will find in a dictionary. Example C is a poetic re-ordering of syntax,

since usually the past participle wedded would follow we have been. The question for teachers is whether such original, but rather unconventional, uses of language are seriously going to confuse the learner.

It has been argued that by asking students to explore such sophisticated uses of language, we are also encouraging them to think about the norms of language use (Widdowson, 1975). In order to understand the stylistic effect of any of the examples above, students will need to be aware of how they differ from more common usage. In Example B, for instance, we might ask students to think of what usually grows; even {19} perhaps to look up common collocations for it in the dictionary. The next stage is to consider what effect is conveyed by suggesting that the ashes are 'growing'. And in the context of a novel or short story this may even help students to interpret its underlying themes more easily. By focussing on the 'deviant' use of the verb here we are helping students not only to become aware of specific stylistic effects in this literary work, but also to consider how this effect is achieved by departing from a norm. At the same time, we are involving them in the process of discovering more generalisable features of language like collocation. In other words, using literature with students can help them to become more sensitive to some of the overall features of English.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERPRETATIVE ABILITIES

Any learning of a new language would seem to involve the learner in the forming of hypotheses and the drawing of inferences, whether these relate to when a particular idiom is used appropriately, how far a grammatical rule can be generalised or what is implied behind the literal meaning of what someone says in a conversation. It has been argued that literature is a particularly good source for developing students' abilities to infer meaning and to make interpretations (see Rossner's interview with Widdowson in *ELT Journal* 37/1). This is because literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/ learner is actively involved in 'teasing out' the unstated implications and assumptions of the text. In a poem, for example, a word may take on a powerful figurative meaning beyond its fixed dictionary definition. Trying to ascertain this significance provides an excellent opportunity for students to discuss their own interpretations, based on the evidence in the text. Thus, by encouraging our students to grapple with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text, we are helping to develop their overall capacity to infer meaning. This very useful skill can then be transferred to other situations where students need to make an interpretation based on implicit or unstated evidence.

EDUCATING THE WHOLE PERSON

The linguistic benefits of using literature with the language learner have been mentioned. But literature may also have a wider educational function in the classroom in that it can help to stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness. If we ask students to respond personally to the texts we give them, they will become increasingly confident about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English. They will feel empowered by their ability to grapple with the text and its language, and to relate it to the values and traditions of their own society.

{20}Conclusion

In this chapter we have started to think about some of the underlying issues and concerns involved in using literature in the language classroom. You may find that you have more questions than answers relating to some of the areas we have touched on. If so, why not write down some of these questions, queries or points for discussion? You may find answers to them later on in the book or in some of the supplementary reading you might choose to do. Or you could discuss some of these ideas with your colleagues.

Endnotes

1. With thanks to the teachers who attended the summer courses in teaching literature at International House, London, in 1989 and 1990.
2. The texts are taken from:
 1. *In Store: The magazine of ideas for your home*, September 1985.
 2. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 14 (Penguin, 1983).
 3. A restaurant review by Nigella Lawson in *The Spectator*, 4 August 1990.
 4. An advertisement for The Royal National Institute for the Deaf.
 5. Ralph C. Opara, 'Lagos Interlude', in Figueroa (1982).
 6. This is a nursery rhyme common in a number of anthologies.
 7. G. This is a piece of colloquial speech which I made up myself.
3. This activity is rather impressionistic, based as it is on the intuitions of the reader. With the advent of computer corporuses which make use of concordances, it would be possible to identify in a more systematic way whether or not certain types of discourse do indeed reveal a high incidence of particular linguistic features. For a useful book on this topic and its application to the classroom see Tribble and Jones (1990).
4. For a book which explores the different factors determining or influencing a reader's response to a literary text, see Suleiman and Crosman (eds.) (1980).
5. The idea of rewriting a newspaper text in the form of a poem comes from Culler (1975), Chapter 8. The sentence from the newspaper, which is then rewritten as a poem, was taken from *The Guardian*, 16 July 1991.
6. For a brief discussion of the socio-political implications of this fact see Crystal (1988), Chapter 1.
7. This concern with criticising and subverting the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions in literary texts is a hallmark of many recent examples of Marxist, feminist and deconstructionist critical theory. Some references for following up these theories are provided in the list of further references.
8. See 'The Deviant Language of Poetry' in Widdowson (1984).

{21}Suggestions for further reading

Literary theory

Eagleton, T. (1983) *Literary Theory*.

Jefferson, A. and Robey, D. (1984) *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*.

Lodge, D. (ed.) (1990) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*.

Selden, R. (1989) *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*.

The issues and debates behind using literature with the language learner

Brumfit, C. J. and Carter, R. A. (eds.) (1986) *Literature and Language Teaching*.

Brumfit, C. J. (ed.) (1983) 'Teaching Literature Overseas: Language-based Approaches' *ELT Documents* 1 15.

Brumfit, C., Carter, R. and Walker, R. (eds.) (1989) 'Literature and the Learner: Methodological Approaches' *ELT Documents* 130.

Carter, R. and Long, M. (1991) *Teaching Literature*.

Holden, S. (ed.) (1988) *Literature and Language* (1987 Sorrento Conference organised by the British Council).

Rossner, R. (1983) 'Talking Shop: H. G. Widdowson on literature and ELT' in *ELT Journal*, 37, 1.