

SHOULD LITERATURE BE INCLUDED IN A COURSE OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

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Summary: *This article debates the opportunity of introducing literature teaching in the courses of foreign languages in secondary schools. If the answer is affirmative, it proposes a few attitudes and methods to be adopted by the teacher in the process. The article is mainly based on Penny Ur's, Jeremy Harmer's, Jim Scrivener's, Adriana Vizental's and Susan L. Stern's opinions, but it includes some other methodology writers' opinions, and also on a few personal suggestions of the author. It evinces the belief that, far from being inappropriate for teaching a foreign language skills as integrated ones, literature can be used as a genuine source of foreign language for teaching purposes instead of artificially conceived samples of language.*

Key words: *literature, method, teaching, text, culture*

Introduction

It should be specified from the start that I, like doubtlessly many other teachers, consider it to be an axiom, noticeable in practice and in theoretical works, that skills are rarely taught in isolation, being most often taught as integrated ones, and even more, as integrating language contents and skills. By language contents I first and foremost mean lexis and grammar. Therefore, I shall approach all skills as integrated skills plus language contents. In this article I follow Jeremy Harmer's presentation of integrated skills, and as it is presented in Penny Ur's, Jeremy Harmer's, Jim Scrivener's, Adriana Vizental's, Susan L. Stern's main methodological works comparatively and contrastively. I have grounded this article on Ur's and Stern's approaches to teaching literature, and on my assumption that literature can and should be used both as a means of developing integrated language skills and contents, and as a formative cultural goal, by choosing the texts for listening and reading activities for the intermediate level, from modernist literature, as it contains both the lexical, grammatical and ideatic contents suitable for the students' age and language level.

Methodological Approaches to the Research

My documentation for this article has been based on my readings of Jeremy Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Jim Scrivener's *Learning Teaching*, Penny Ur's *A Course in Language Teaching* and *Five Minutes Activities*, as well as Adriana Vizental's *Metodica predării limbii engleze - Strategies of Teaching and Testing English as a Foreign Language* and Susan L. Stern's ".An Integrated Approach to Literature in ESL/EFL."

As Jeremy Harmer states, all skills taught in language teaching classes are integrated. A teacher cannot teach reading without teaching listening and speaking, vocabulary, and occasionally grammar, or addressing language communicative functions (e.g. summing up, paraphrasing, debating, expressing one's opinion, reviewing).

Reading, beside listening, belongs to the receptive teaching-learning activities. If it is extensive (as in the case of literature, the teaching means of this research), it involves the choice of appropriate texts as to the degree of lexical and grammar difficulty, and length, which should be applicable to intermediate classes. That is why I choose stories and not novels, and I pay attention to the content and ideas communicated by the texts, so that they could be understood by teenagers and be appropriate to their age and respond to their interests and preferences. When the text is too long, I select the more representative excerpts, lest the pleasure of reading should turn into a discouraging effort.

Intensive reading, or reading done for teaching, includes skimming, or reading for gist or general comprehension, scanning or reading for finding particular information, reading for finding out about language aspects, or contents, such as vocabulary, grammar structures, reading for communication while solving tasks, which regards language functions.

As specified by Harmer, Scrivener and other afore mentioned authors, skimming /reading for gist/ reading for general comprehension comes with the first read, and it includes a lead-in or pre-reading step, a while-reading step and a post-reading or feedback step. These can be followed by a scanning or reading for specific information, having the same pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading steps. The activities related to the text are included in the follow-up step, which has a vast variety of tasks and a communicative freer character. When the reading is specifically addressed to analysing literary texts, as is the case of Conrad's four stories, the second reading may be followed by inferential questions, following Susan L. Stern's advice on "the third stratum of comprehension, the personal/evaluative level" (Stern 333-34).

The same steps apply to listening to CDs containing the respective pieces of literature and to some of the writing activities deriving from the respective reading.

Communicative tasks starting from reading involve productive skills (speaking and writing), which, in the case of literary texts, address vocabulary tasks, grammar aspects encountered in the texts, language functions (such as expressing an opinion, debating, arguing, summarizing, relating).

An interesting point about teaching vocabulary is that not all the unknown words should be explained by the teacher to the students, who should try to find the meaning from the context, otherwise excessive time would be wasted.

Developing Integrated Skills through Literature

Mention should be made of the fact that the reading of the respective four short stories implies the fact that every student should get acquainted to the whole texts. That means the photocopying of the stories and their reading by the students either previously to the class or, partly, during the class. One can use the Project Gutenberg variants of the texts, available on the Internet. For the pre-intermediate classes, one can use excerpts from the texts, to spare time.

For extensive and intensive listening classes teachers can use the Project Gutenberg audio variants of the respective texts. In some cases, there are available films and audio-books for teaching listening.

For the first reading (or listening) of the texts, a general comprehension questionnaire of the dual or multiple choice type will be used. For the second reading, for detailed comprehension of special information to be looked up in the scanned text, I wh-questionnaires will be used.

Speaking will be taught by retelling the story, summarizing, by giving personal opinions, debate and arguing, by characters' mock trials, role play.

For the development of writing skills, one uses rephrasing, modified cloze, ordering mixed up sentences/ paragraphs, summaries, comments, reviews.

Grammar issues will be addressed whenever samples are found in the texts, and similar grammar exercises with words not belonging to the texts will be added to the same purpose for reinforcement.

Vocabulary will be explained by the teacher with a pre-imposed limit of the number of words or of the time allowed to it. Vocabulary will be then discovered by the students by

sharing words in pairs, and then in groups of four students. It can also be taught through synonyms and rephrasing, and, whenever possible, by antonyms and word families, and semantic fields/word clouds. Matching exercises can be used for this purpose.

The article will discuss the respective advantages, difficulties and solutions of the aforementioned techniques.

Literature : Should It Be Included in the Course?

The question above is proposed by Penny Ur for consideration, research and application to teachers.

According to Ur, the advantages of literature teaching are:

- its being “enjoyable to read”(201);
- its “providing authentic examples of different styles of writing”(201);
- being “a good basis for vocabulary expansion” (201);
- “foster[ing] reading skills” (201);
- supply[ing] “a jumping point for discussion or writing” (201);
- “involv[ing] both emotions and intellect,” motivation (201);
- being “part of the target of culture, general education” (201);
- “encourag[ing] empathetic, critical, creative thinking” (201);
- “contribut[ing] to world knowledge” (201);
- “rais[ing] awareness of different human situations and conflicts” (201).

She finds the following disadvantages of teaching literature:

- language can be difficult;
- simplified readers are poor representations of the real thing;
- many texts are “long and time-consuming” (201);
- the target culture of the text being alien to the students may be “difficult to relate to” (201);
- using texts as a basis for teaching may spoil the students’ contact with them for enjoyment;
- “students of science and technology may find literature irrelevant” (201).

Ur is in favour of introducing literature for study. She prefers short texts for time saving. She recommends using simplified abbreviated versions. (which I do not agree with, since these are no better than summaries).

It is true that enjoyment can be spoiled by exercises, but there is a cultural and language gain, and on the whole this is profitable. Literature may be irrelevant for science students, but they may discover the pleasure of reading (Ur 202).

As Susan L. Stern remarks, there has been English literature teaching as EFL/ESL in many continental countries for more than 125 years. That has happened due to the general recognition of the formative advantages that the study of literature offers, such as linguistic benefits, “cultural benefits” e.g. “it fosters cognitive and aesthetic maturation, develops the ability to make critical and mature judgements, develops a feeling and appreciation for the language, and has the capacity to move the reader.” (Stern 329). Thus English literature study develops a “dimension of depth” (Stevick 1976), “a deeper dimension to language learning than does the current emphasis on communication” (Stern 329). However, paradoxically, there has been a period of over 25 years of difficulties for teaching English literature as EFL/ESL (Stern 329). The problems with literature teaching rise from a lack of interest and are mainly, according to Stern, the “paucity of resources and materials” and the “lack of preparation in the area of literature teaching in TESL/TEFL programs” (330). That happens in spite of the fact that literature can be taught as integrated skills at any age, even at very young learners, as “short stories, fairy tales, plays and poems” (330).

Teaching through literature is formative as it aids to moulding a new skill: culture. Students are able to learn about the English culture and to compare/contrast it to their own native cultures. Specific goals in this respect are:

1. Introduction to cultural context. (e.g. Joseph Conrad’s biography and fiction presentation)
2. Culture aside (e.g. presentation of the literary trends existing in Conrad’s works)
3. Culture capsule (a brief description of a single aspect, e.g. approaching certain works by Conrad through an ecocritical lens)
4. Group work on culture : discussion on a theme, between characters belonging to a text. These differ by nationality, customs, profession, ethnic features, religious features; e.g. they may be Victorians sailors; they may be Napoleonic or Russians officers. (344)

The selection of literature should be made from modern or contemporary texts (for the language and outlooks to be close to the readers’ ones) and the themes should be universal, to enable all the students to relate to them. (344)

Literature : Teaching Ideas

Ur’s questions on teaching literature are:

1. “Should we pre-teach new words?” (203). Ur says we should.
2. “Should we do some preparatory work on content and atmosphere?” (203) We should, in the warm-up activities.

3. “Should we provide some information about the author and the cultural background?” (203) She thinks we should.

4. Should we try reading as much as possible from the text the first time, or “take it gradually?” (203) She advises reading the whole text from the first impact.

5. Should students read “silently on their own?” (203) Usually the teacher reads aloud. Students reading aloud are less clear. With advanced classes silent reading is preferred.

6. “How can we check initial understanding?” (203) This is generally done by closed-ended comprehension questions. Ur, however, prefers a more open-ended technique: a summary, asking students what they have understood, asking for gut reactions, a brief discussion, inviting questions which are written on the board. (Ur 203)

Ur’s teaching ideas for understanding and familiarization with the texts are:

1. “Rereading, “ differently from the first time”: silently “if the first was aloud,” and vice versa (204);

2. Looking for “bits you did not understand,” to be used “for later discussion” (204);

3. Copying bits that “you particularly liked” (204) and sharing;

4. Looking “for a quotation[...] as an alternative title” (204);

5. Rewriting the text “from someone else’s point of view”(204);

6. Rewriting the text “in a different genre or style”(204);

7. Presenting the text visually as “a flowchart, a diagram, a graph, a list of events, a grid” (204);

8. Drawing an illustration,[...] a book-cover, an advert, a poster (204).

When considering the teacher’s role in leading interpretative discussion, she notes the following situations:

1. The teacher is a literature fan, he “infects students”(205) with his passion, but does not let them have their own opinions;

2. The teacher is cold, students may have their own opinions, but those who are indifferent to literature remain so;

3. The teacher lets students develop their own opinions even if they are wrong;

4. The teacher lets students have their opinions, but if they are wrong he intervenes for justifications;

5. The teacher is “a prober, challenger, getting students to examine texts critically, bring evidence. He sometimes throws in outrageous ideas for the sake of provocation” (Ur 205).

Literature : Teaching a Specific Text

When preparing to teach a literary text, Ur's steps are:

- 1.Planning;
- 2.(optional) Experience and reflection;
- 3.Sharing and summarizing (with other teachers) (Ur 206).

Ur asks students to read easy texts silently, then mime the events, or draw a picture (for younger students). Older students benefit from a photo; all students benefit from a dramatic role-reading. Students may divide the text into chapters, analyse content, punctuation, anything. Do they find it humorous, dramatic, tragic? They can retell the text from another character's viewpoint (Ur 206).

Concrete Ways of Developing Language Skills as Integrated Skills

Jeremy Harmer considers that skills are receptive (listening, reading) and productive (speaking, writing), and they are taught together, as integrated skills. Students are exposed to multiple input, from teachers, reading, the media, and this input becomes output. The students' output is submitted to the teacher's and other students' assessment, and the result of this feedback becomes further input, in an input-output cycle (Harmer 266).

He considers that teaching occurs either as (1) "Straight Arrows"- PPP (presentation-practice-production)/ ESA (engage- study-activate), or as (2) "Boomerang"- PPP (production,-presentation-practice)/ EAS (engage-activate-study), but most often language teaching is more like (3) "Patchwork," a combination of "Straight Arrows" and "Boomerang" (Harmer 67).

To integrate skills, speaking is used as preparation and stimulus in the lead-in step, as a way of activating the students' schemata by engaging them in a topic discussion.

Texts are used either as models or as preparation and stimulus. In this line, a controversial text can be the start of a debate.

For solving almost any task, students will use integrated skills: they will listen, read, speak and write simultaneously. Task-based learning is based on the idea of skill integration, which is a major factor in lesson planning (Harmer 268).

According to Harmer, work on language skills generally precedes work on language contents. There is an aspect of language skills or contents that can be drawn from any written text or audio. Integrating skills and language contents work can be achieved by activities staged in the following manner in a random example:

- Stage 1 The students complete a questionnaire;
- Stage 2 The students read a text;
- Stage 3 The students answer a comprehension test;
- Stage 4 The students look in the text for any words describing physical appearance;
- Stage 5 The students rewrite the text from another angle;
- Stage 6 The students write physical descriptions of well-known people; (follow-up)
- Stage 7 The students listen to a conversation on a police line-up action (follow-up) (268).

Processing language in a text is either “top-down” (from general to particular) or “bottom-up”(from particular to general). Readers/listeners generally process a text top-down, but not only, as they may combine top-down and bottom-up.

For teaching receptive skills, a basic methodological method distinguishes between type 1 tasks (for general understanding) and type 2 tasks (for specific understanding: for specific information or for language points). Such a teaching sequence starts with a lead-in, where prediction can be made. Then one reads/ listens for gist (skims), for which feedback follows. Sometimes one can end with a follow-up, but generally there is a second reading/ listening for specific information (scanning), followed by a feedback and a follow-up, in the task-feedback circle, a snailshell-like cycle (Harmer 271, identical to Scrivener 253.)

The language content issue raises certain difficulties. There is a number of unknown words, which hinder understanding. When listening, if there is one word that one does not understand, one thinks of it, misses the following words and does not understand the text as a whole, which is demotivating, that is why Stephen Krashen proposes the difficulty level to be “i+1” (i. e. information +1, close to the starting level, but slightly upper). A solution to the problem is pre-teaching vocabulary: the teacher should give the students a text or a listening containing the new words. (Harmer 272)

Also, extensive reading or listening (i. e. reading or listening at length) is the best way for students to develop automaticity (i.e. automatic recognition of words).The respective texts should have authenticity (they should be authentic reading and listening texts) containing roughly-tuned language (Harmer 273). Therefore, I gather that Harmer considers literature texts welcome.

Comprehension tasks include testing and teaching, e.g. filling in forms, doing puzzles.They are halfway between teaching and testing, a test can be turned into a training tool. They should present the students with the appropriate challenge, at the right level, neither too difficult, nor too easy (Harmer 275).

A basic methodological model for teaching productive skills contains the following steps:

“Pre,” i.e. lead-in, when the teacher engages the students;

“Set,” i.e. when the teacher sets the task;

“While,” i.e. when the teacher monitors the task;

“Post,” i.e. when the teacher gets feedback;

The activity closes with a task-related “follow-up” step (Harmer 276).

In structuring the discourse, one must remember to keep it coherent (i.e. logical) and cohesive (i.e. connected). For cohesion, one uses chains of reference, pronouns, lexical repetition and synonymy, linkers (of addition, of contrast, cause and effect, and time). Spoken English has formulaic lexical phrases.

Language functions are speech events such as agreeing, disagreeing, inviting, suggesting, etc. Speakers interact with an audience and deal with difficulty, which they solve by:

-improvising;

-discarding (abandoning the idea);

-foreignising (giving a foreign shape to their expression);

-paraphrasing (Harmer 277).

The language issue can be solved by supplying key language or by planning activities in advance (Harmer 279).

Projects belong to task-based language (TBL). They are longer than essays. When managing them, teachers follow the following steps:

-the briefing (i.e. the choice of the topic and aims), when they set the aims;

-the idea / language generation;

-the data gathering;

-the planning;

-the drafting and editing (Harmer 279-80).

The result is a blog, a role-play or a report. Throughout the lifetime of a project, teachers act as consultation or tutorials. Harmer exemplifies the project work with a webquest project (a multi-skilled project (Harmer 280)).

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