

Teaching English as a foreign language in Spanish secondary schools: The value of literature

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ABSTRACT: Although it is generally accepted that literature plays a critical role in our lives by helping us reflect on ourselves and the world, still it is one the most underrated subjects of study in schools, especially when it comes to its use as a tool for the teaching of English language in the EFL context. In spite of the references to literature in the curriculum of the different courses of the Spanish ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education) and Bachillerato (Baccalaureate) included in the BOE (Official State Gazette), reality in the classroom shows that literature is relegated to a nearly non-presence. The main goal of this classroom narrative is thus to reflect upon the current situation, as well as to underline the relevance of literature as a tool to teach EFL in Spanish secondary schools.

KEY WORDS: Literature, teaching EFL, Spanish Secondary Schools.

We would be worse than we are without the good books we have read, more conformist, not as restless, more submissive, and the critical spirit, the engine of progress, would not even exist. Like writing, reading is a protest against the insufficiencies of life. "Protest" is a term most students must and should identify with. Protest in its constructive and positive meaning, that which should lead young people to work on and develop their critical skills, to question issues dealt with in class not just as a show of rebellion but as a show of reasoned and coherent criticism of the "establishment". (Vargas Llosa, 2010, para 6)

INTRODUCTION

Vargas Llosa's quotation encompasses one of the most beautiful chants to the significance of literature in the formation of free spirits – literature as an instrument to articulate consistent and rational dissent against injustices, literature as a medium to provide our students with the critical apparatus to question the established system. Today more than ever seems to be the moment to offer learners the adequate assets to perform as real citizens in the near future. As Wolk (2009) states, "living in a democracy poses specific obligations for reading...a democracy requires people that *do* read, read widely, and think and act in response to their reading" (p. 672).

However, although it is generally accepted that literature plays a critical role in our lives by helping us reflect on ourselves and the world, it is still one the most underrated subjects of study in schools, especially when it comes to its use as a tool for the teaching of English language in the EFL context. In spite of the references to literature in the curriculum of the different courses of the Spanish *ESO* (Compulsory Secondary Education) and *Bachillerato* (Baccalaureate) included in the *BOE* (Official State Gazette), reality in the classroom shows that literature is relegated to a virtual

non-presence¹. Students' scarce command of the English language and time constraints in the curriculum are among the main objections cited by educators. So, preparing teachers to discern their students' reading processes and literary experiences becomes key to facilitating effective literacy opportunities. It is my contention that literature has a valuable and significant role to play in the teaching of English in Spanish secondary schools². As Amos Paran (2006) underlines,

the major change that has occurred in the approach to literature is in its relationship with language. Language and literature are not seen as separate entities; rather, teachers now stress the way in which understanding one is part of understanding the other. (p. 2)

The main goal of this narrative is, therefore, to reflect upon the current situation as well as to underline the relevance of literature as a tool to teach EFL in Spanish secondary schools.

The reasons which appeared in most of the first publications dealing with the importance of literature in the EFL classroom – valuable authentic material, cultural and language enrichment and personal involvement and motivation (cf. Collie & Slater, 1987) – are still present in recent publications (Carter, 2007; Paran, 2006). In fact, it is my contention that, with a good selection of texts and with appropriate follow-up activities, literature could even be used to structure an entire course for young learners. However, this is far from the the case in Spanish secondary schools, where teachers generally follow a textbook and the presence of literary texts is relegated to graded reader assignments.

In the following paragraphs, I present an empirical study which investigated in-service teachers' and the students' attitudes towards literature and its use in the EFL classroom. I drew up questionnaires in which I attempted to explore their views on an approach to English language teaching in secondary schools that integrated literature. I surveyed 20 English language teachers in five public secondary schools to ensure a representative sample. The survey included qualitative components. Teachers responded to questions related to their reading habits and their attitudes regarding the use of literature – in its broadest sense – in the EFL classroom. I also surveyed 221 students belonging to different levels of the *ESO* and *Bachillerato*. The research findings were as follows.

Of the whole 20, in-service teacher group, only two teachers categorically rejected the inclusion of literature – both classic and young adult literature (YAL) – as a vehicle to teach English language. These two teachers put forward the following arguments:

¹ Compulsory Education in Spain starts at the age of six but usually children are at school from the time they are three years old. Primary Education spans from the age of six till the age of eleven. Students enter Spanish high schools at the age of twelve and, if they perform well, they remain there till they are seventeen. I say “if they perform well” because the Spanish *ESO* (*Compulsory Secondary Education*) only covers ages twelve to fifteen. The next step – *Bachillerato* (*Baccalaureate*) – is only compulsory if one wants to go to University and it covers ages sixteen and seventeen. English as a Foreign Language is taught then from the age of six.

² We are going to defend here a broad use of the term literature, a concept which includes a variety of texts ranging from the classics to popular literature, young adult literature, comic strips, hypertexts, digital narratives, and so on.

1. The students don't know enough English;
2. It is time consuming;
3. There is a syllabus to be covered.

The rest of the group surveyed used literature occasionally and viewed it as a complementary resource. In fact, most of them admitted using graded readers while some of them even reported to have used effectively fragments from Roald Dahl's, Langston Hughes' and E. A. Poe's works. In spite of not using literature regularly, they held a positive attitude towards it since they considered literature as "real language" that could contribute to the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary and general language skills as well as to the enrichment of the students' literary and cultural repertoires. Actually, when confronted with the series of statements listed in Appendix 1, 18 out of 20 showed their agreement with all of them whereas the other two respondents disagreed only with statements 1 and 2. An aspect that materialized in the data analysis was the notion that those teachers who were reluctant to implement literature in the classroom felt a great lack of confidence in their abilities to use and teach literature, an impression which did not emerge in the rest of the respondents. Finally, although not all of them used technologies in the classroom, the vast majority considered that they could be extremely valuable for the implementation of literature among *ESO* and *Bachillerato* students.

One notable outcome of this study was that although only 48 per cent of students reported reading regularly, up to 57 per cent avowed to have read in Spanish titles works such as *Twilight* or the Harry Potter's series. A meagre 2 per cent even affirmed to have read some of them in English also. All in all, the results were promising since, in spite of their limited reading habits, nearly 85 per cent of the sample was willing to have a choice in the classroom texts and they cited an enormous amount of Young Adult Literature titles as examples of books they would like to read as part of their curriculum. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* as well as classics such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Catcher in the Rye* were among the pieces mentioned.

If, as some critics state, "the ways in which teachers mediate literature with students has a profound effect on the kind of readers they become" (Ganske & Fisher, 2010, pp. 98-9) and the students' degree of motivation "impacts the extent and manner in which they use comprehension strategies" (pp. 98-9), educators should make sure the act of reading literature in the EFL classroom becomes a pleasurable experience for learners since, when readers are confident of success, they are "more likely to put forth effort and persist when they encounter difficulties" (pp. 98-9).

Many studies show that reading extends students' vocabulary and background knowledge since, while reading, students apply their developing word-solving skills. But what is obvious is that "students have to read things they *can* read for this to be effective" (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2009, pp. 68-9). Most of the in-service teachers responding to our survey referred to the difficulties their students would encounter in being presented with "real" pieces of literature. Ernest Hemingway's six-word short story is an excellent counter example to this misconception: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

The words are very easy to understand. Most of our students would not have any problem in understanding the meaning of the language. Thus, what do we need to interpret the story? Certainly, not a complex knowledge of words, of vocabulary, of complex structures but a capacity to make inferences:

Although the importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading can hardly be overstated, comprehension isn't just a matter of "adding up" the meanings of words to understand the whole. The click of comprehension occurs only when the reader evolves a schema that explains the whole message. (Ganske & Fisher, 2010, p. 103)

This is exactly the same as happens in one's own language. This is a perfect example of how, when confronted with literature, students need not only to pay attention to lexical and grammatical patterns but also to make sense of "second-level thematic meanings in the discourse between the text and the reader" (Lin, 2006, p. 101). Thus, literature allows students to respond critically to language constructions and build their own meanings. Researchers of literary discourse remind us of the power of literature to stimulate thinking and point out that "literature does not provide answers; rather, it poses questions and provokes the thought process" (Gordon, Zaleski and Goodman, 2006, p. 61). Consequently, literature in the context of the EFL classroom is not only a tool to teach communicative skills but also a cross-curricular element in learners' education.

Nevertheless, even in the case where students need to deal with new words, educators, in order to diminish their level of stress, should help them to develop a series of strategies to deal with those new words. Fisher et al. (2009) suggest a series of aspects which need to be considered. They refer to the relevance of the word for the comprehension of the text, to its frequency in everyday use and to the possibility of using the context or the structure of the word to unveil the meaning of the word (pp. 66-7). Consequently, an adequate consideration of the learner's knowledge is needed in order to make the appropriate choice of literary texts since, as they state, "reading should not be a laborious process in which the reader struggles through a text, word by word, trying to figure out what is happening" (Fisher et al, 2009, p. 26).

However, "simply leveling books by text experience" is not the answer since "both interest and motivation have a profound effect on the difficulty the reader experiences" (Fisher et al, 2009, p. 26). Some scholars emphasize the importance of choice in student reading (Lapp & Fisher 2009; Bull 2011). In fact, Galda and Liang (2003) noted that readers became engrossed in a work of fiction when they were reading voluntarily and from a primarily aesthetic stance. Young adult literature works can be used as an instrument to implement reading habits and skills and as a prelude and bridge to canonical literature, since we may well rely on the assumption that "in a foreign language, learners might react well to literature that had been written specifically for their own age group" (Paran, 2008, p. 488). This means literature that is relevant to their life experiences, emotions and dreams. It is for this reason that we should endorse the implementation of Young Adult Literature (YAL) in the secondary school classroom.

The success of George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (1996), J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1998-2007), Stephanie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight*, Suzanne

Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) attests to adolescents' interest in books. Far from being a *minor* type of literature, YAL is really important, since it is mostly responsible for making adolescents keen on reading. When we are young, as Bassnett (2005) states, "we acquire learning habits that are hard to change when we grow older. The role of the school is vital, perhaps even more vital than the role of the family" (p. 207), particularly when it comes to encouraging reading. YAL can be extremely helpful in the Spanish EFL secondary school classrooms, since its words, linguistic structures and subject matter are consistent with the required vocabulary and grammatical level of this age-group of learners.

For Chris Brumfit, "the most valuable literature enabled students to define themselves 'through contact with others' experience'" (Carter, 2007, p. 7). Thus, the role of the educator is tantamount to developing the necessary conditions to enable this contact. As we have argued in previous pages, if we allow our students to choose the books they read, their engagement with the texts will increase. It is up to the instructors to provide them with the necessary context to share their literary experiences.

However, some of the main drawbacks for implementing literature in the language classroom have to do with the lack of training of in-service English instructors in this field and with their attitudes towards the issue. On the one hand, as Paran (2006) affirms, some teachers lack "the methodological wherewithal" (p. 480) to use literature in their teaching. As a result, they replicate the same techniques in which they were taught, "perpetuating teacher-centred approaches" and sending out a powerful message: "literature is not something that is worth dealing with" (p. 480). On the other hand, some educators strongly reject the consideration of literature as an instrument for the teaching of the English language, forgetting that a myriad of studies show that reading widely influences background knowledge and level of vocabulary (Marzano, 2004; Fisher et al., 2009). Thus, we may say that some of the queries and doubts some teachers still experience when dealing with the use of literature in the classroom have to do with inaccurate assumptions. In order to subvert these fallacies, I designed a session which was intended to show the advantages of introducing literature in the classroom using the students' interests and exploiting their motivations.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SESSION: SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS

The lesson began with showing students slides containing adolescents exhibiting negative attitudes towards reading. One of them showed a student returning home from school and addressing his mother in the following terms: "What a school day! The computers broke down and we had to READ!" The students were asked if they identified with the character on the slide and they responded in the negative. Then I led a short discussion about their attitudes towards words such as "poetry", "drama", or "narrative fiction". Most of them admitted a certain reluctance to reading poems because they identified the genre with gravity and tediousness. Students were then presented with Roger McGough's poem "40 Love" and were asked to reflect upon the significance of the title. Once the connection between the title and the tennis scores had been made, they were requested to read the poem aloud.

middle	aged
couple	playing
ten-	nis
when	the
game	ends
and	they
go	home
the	net
will	still
be	be –
tween	them

(McGough, 2006)

They were very quick to realize that, in order to make sense of the poem, they needed to read it as if they were playing tennis. The main aim of this activity was to try and instill in them the idea that poetry can be funny and intriguing and that they may need to make use of “detective” strategies to reconstruct literary meanings.

The following activities were designed to build their confidence and self-esteem. First, I wanted students to realize that they could read “real” literature in English if they wanted to, and, second, I wanted them to feel that they were more familiar with literature in English than they thought.

I asked them to work on an exercise in which they were expected to match five quotations from YAL works with their original titles and authors. I used fragments from Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia” from the *Sherlock Holmes* series, Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*, and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Appendix 2). By making use of their background knowledge and of the same reading strategies they would use in their mother language, all of them managed to make the right matches.

In order to wake up in them a positive attitude towards reading literature in English, the following step was to make them reflect upon the presence of canonical literature in their everyday life. I introduced a series of slides containing famous literary figures and worked on the connections between their origins as classics and their presence in popular culture and in our daily lives: Arthurian literature and Harry Potter, Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet in the cinema and in videogames, iconic works in English and American literature and *The Simpsons* (*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, “The Raven”, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Bell Jar*), Beyonce’s “Countdown” and the Audrey Hepburn of Truman Capote’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, George Orwell’s *1984* and *Big Brother*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and a campaign to launch t-shirts targeted at homosexuals. The results were revealing since nearly everyone was familiar with the vast majority of the references.

To conclude, I designed an exercise intended to explore students' literary tastes and motivations. I presented them with a series of excerpts and asked them to read them and select those ones they would continue reading. The quotes dealt with issues such as adolescent sex, beauty and ethnicity and some of them made use of atypical narrative techniques (Appendix 3). Not surprisingly, they were entranced by all of them and extremely curious about what was going to ensue. What their reactions clearly evince is that with a good selection of fragments – both in terms of adaptation to their interests and language level – literature can become a useful instrument to be used in the EFL classroom.

CONCLUSION

This narrative has focused on the introduction of literature in the EFL secondary school for its pedagogical value. The session described has indicated a wide range of educational possibilities that justify the inclusion of literature as part of the curriculum of EFL in Spanish secondary education. Although this narrative is part of an ongoing project and further investigation still needs to be made, it noticeably shows the potential of bringing literature into the EFL classroom. What is really negative is the reluctance of some English teachers to modify their *modus operandi*. The future for literature in secondary school resides in facing up to the challenges posed by new generations of students, and what is really necessary is a radical rethinking of the subject.

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APPENDIX 1

Do you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statements?

1. Literature provides an authentic context for the teaching of grammar and vocabulary.
 2. Literature provides motivation for language learning.
 3. The themes of literary works provide stimuli for meaningful discussions.
 4. Literature provides learners with insights into the norms and cultural values embodied in the language.
 5. The study of literature educates the whole person in a way that more functional approaches to language teaching do not.
 6. Linking the study of literary texts to language activities (i.e. rewriting the endings of the stories, role-playing) makes the texts more accessible to the learners.
 7. Learners cannot develop literary competence without an adequate competence in language. Integration of language and literature helps to compensate for it.
- (Adapted from a questionnaire in Butler, Ian. 2006. "A Brighter Future? Integrating Language and Literature for First-Year University Students", in Amos Paran, 2006)

APPENDIX 2

Match the quotations on the left column with the titles on the right one

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>A. These are the things I decided I would do this year:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stop smoking. 2. Develop a mature relationship with an adult man. 3. Go to the gym. 4. Be kinder and help others more. | <p>1. Suzanne Collins, <i>The Hunger Games</i></p> |
| <p>B. When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol.</p> | <p>2. Roald Dahl's <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i></p> |
| <p>C. About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him-and I didn't know how potent that part might be-that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.</p> | <p>3. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" from the <i>Sherlock Holmes</i> series</p> |

D. ...she is always *the* woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions [...] were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind. He was [...] the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen.

4. Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*

E. I, Willy Wonka, have decided to allow five children – just *five*, mind you, and no more – to visit my factory this year. These lucky five will be shown around personally by me, and they will be allowed to see all the secrets and the magic of my factory.

5. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*

APPENDIX 3

1 “My mother is nineteen years old. The trash chute down which I was dropped is forty-five feet from the door of the apartment my mother was visiting. I was born and will die Monday, August 12, 1991.”

John Edgar Wideman's “Newborn thrown in trash and dies”

2 “Sex is something I really don't understand too hot. You never know where the hell you are. I keep making up these sex rules for myself, and then I break them right away. Last year I made a rule that I was going to quit horsing around with girls that, deep down, gave me a pain in the ass.”

J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Chapter 9

3 “Each night Pecola prayed for blue eyes. In her eleven years, no one had ever noticed Pecola. But with blue eyes, she thought, everything would be different. She would be so pretty that her parents would stop fighting. Her father would stop drinking. Her brother would stop running away. If only she could be beautiful. If only people would look at her.”

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

4 “Miss Mandible wants to make love to me but she hesitates because I am officially a child; I am, according to the records [...] eleven years old. There is a misconception here, one that I haven't quite managed to get cleared up yet. I am in fact thirty-five, I've been in the Army, I'm six feet one, I have hair in the appropriate places...”

Donald Barthelme, *Me and Miss Mandible*

5 “Twice a year, every year, the *sucias* show up [...] We can be anywhere in the world [...] but we get on a plane, train, whatever, and get back to Boston for a night of food, drink (my specialty), *chisme y charla*. (That's gossip and chat, y'all). [...] A lot of you probably don't speak Spanish, and so don't know what the hell a '*sucia*' is. That's okay. No, really. Some of us *sucias* can't speak Spanish, either”

Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, *The Dirty Girls Social Club*