

Literature in the foreign language syllabus: Engaging the student through active learning

El rol de la literatura en la enseñanza de lengua extranjera: la implicación del estudiante en el aula a través del aprendizaje activo

Agustín Reyes Torres

Universitat de València

agustin.reyes@uv.es

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Resumen: ¿Por qué es tan importante para el profesor de lengua extranjera en la actualidad hacer uso de la literatura en el aula? Esta comunicación destaca el papel de la literatura a la hora de implicar al estudiante en el aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera y hacerle practicarla. El aprendizaje activo es en este sentido un factor clave para motivarle a leer y trabajar con los textos literarios. Del mismo modo, el rol del profesor como facilitador y el uso de estrategias como el seminario socrático constituyen recursos efectivos para situar al estudiante como sujeto central de la enseñanza, consiguiendo así su implicación y haciendo el aprendizaje más personal, significativo y memorable.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de la literatura, aprendizaje activo.

Abstract: Why is it so important for foreign language teachers today to use literature in the classroom? This paper highlights the benefits of literature in making students more discerning users and consumers of language. Active learning is in this sense a key factor in engaging the learner with the literary works. Likewise, the role of the teacher as a facilitator and the use of strategies such as the Socratic Seminar constitute effective ways to shift the balance from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, thus increasing students' engagement and providing forums for learning to be more personal, meaningful, and memorable.

Key words: teaching literature, active learning.

“Aristotle observed, ‘All men by nature desire to learn.’ It might be added that some men seem to desire it more than others. And what makes the difference? In part, the difference is superior teaching. Outstanding teachers do more than convey knowledge; they also spur the desire to learn”.

Criswell Freeman, 1998

“Active learning shifts the focus from teachers and their delivery of course content to students and their active engagement with the material”.

Walter Wager, 2002

Why is it so important for foreign language teachers today to

understand and use literature in the classroom? Does literature have a place in the language class? For a long time the teaching of literature has been carried out in a sort of accepted isolation, or reduced to assigning some random readings that students have to do outside of class, or in the worst scenarios, literature has not been part of the foreign language syllabus at all. In contrast to the extensive body of research on the teaching and acquisition of a foreign language, relatively little attention has been devoted to the teaching of its literature in primary and secondary schools, and even in the Departments of Education at the university level in Spain.

Pragmatism in education and an increasing demand for accountability have placed the foreign language teaching profession in the cross fire of multiple needs and expectations. Since then the cross fire has only increased; there is a high pressure on raising the students’ language skills, and ironically, this affects negatively the teaching of literature. Let’s be realistic. It is critical to pay attention to what may be preventing teachers from trying to include literature in the language courses. Some of the obstacles, for example, in English, include that a significant number of primary and high school teachers still struggle with their own command of English; the majority of English textbooks focus only on language; there is a tendency to tailor classes to what students should know rather than what they actually know; the fact that including literature in the English lessons only increases the teachers’ load of work and makes evident their lack of material and expertise. And finally, there is also a lack of adult role models for reading at home along with a boom of alternatives for entertainment that make student’s early experiences with literature in school all the more worrying.

Under these circumstances, not only is it crucial to demonstrate that literary study can offer significant benefits to language students, but also that the advantages of

active learning through literature in the languages are many. However, they do not certainly rise from mere exposure to great books, or from listening passively as others discuss them. As Kimberly NANCE states: *Students need to read for themselves, think critically about what they read, and then express and develop their responses through discussing and writing* (2010: xi). In this regard, class discussions and Socratic Seminars are effective ways to shift the balance from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, thus increasing students' engagement and providing forums for learning to be more personal, meaningful, and memorable. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons language teachers have not always been successful at engaging all students in those tasks, a situation that has brought up fair questions about the role of literature in language curricula. Foreign language teachers must find ways to extend engagement with literature and the benefits it offers to students. Accomplishing that goal means facing a long list of factors: not only ways to select, organize, and teach course content, but also ways to change many students' current assumptions about literature and about their active participation in class.

According to Robert SCHOLÉS, *what students [...] need is the kind of knowledge and skill that will enable them to make sense of their worlds, to determine their own interests, both individual and collective, to see through the manipulations of all sorts of texts in all sorts of media, and to express their views in some appropriate manner* (1985: 15). He calls attention to the value of literary study in making students more discerning users and consumers of language. In his opinion, the close and careful reading that takes place when students work with the complex and varied discourses of literature helps them to become more analytical about all forms of language. Active learning, in this sense, means that students *participate* in their own education and *do* active things that result in learning (YOUNG, 1994: 32). Furthermore, Joanne COLLIE and Stephen SLATER consider that *in reading literary texts, students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on* (2007: 4). Students, therefore, not only get acquainted with new vocabulary and language structures, but also would be better equipped to make sense of the daily overflow of messages intended to influence them, and to organize and frame their own messages in ways that stand a better chance of influencing others. In the same line of argument, Janet SWAFFAR points out that nowadays students have access to a lot of information and images, but they are urgently in need of ways to situate that data in some larger context. *Students need, she states, training in the skills it takes to become knowledgeable* (1998: 36). Literature, in this way, contributes to teach students to make sense of information that does not come neatly arranged or prepared for easy consumption (NANCE, 2010: 4). They learn to reflect, to seek answers and to ask significant questions about significant issues. That is the goal of active learning; instead of being handed the answers by a teacher, students are given the tools to learn to think for themselves.

From a cultural perspective, it is unquestionable that literature also plays a relevant role bringing students closer to the way of life of a country. It is thus a vehicle to increase the learner's insight into that country's culture whose language is being learned. As KORITZ puts it: *because literature engages the subjective dimensions of experience in ways that evoke empathy with lives different from our own, it provides a unique and powerful pathway for exploring*

the relation of individuals to the public realm (2005: 80). Through literature, students not only see people they might never have encountered or spoken with in ordinary life, they see the world through the eyes of the characters portrayed in a story. This multicultural aspect of literature can be used to teach readers to identify cultural heritages, understand psychological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations, and expand imagination and creativity. When literature is part of the curriculum, and when teachers know how to select the appropriate readings and to develop strategies and activities with it, they encourage students to see commonalities and value in literature different from their own culture (NORTON, 2009: 2). In contrast, merely placing the literature in a classroom or a library without subsequent interaction does not change attitudes and cultural views. Only close reading and class discussion of the literary works can help students think about social, political or cultural matters with a privileged access to the thoughts and feelings of another person.

The role of the teacher, in this respect, is central to engaging students with literature. As Gerald GRAFF indicates, teachers need to shift the focus from how students cannot realize the importance of literature to *what students can do as a result of seeing us* [teachers] (Cited in NANCE, 2020: 3). Some primary objectives for the language teachers could be:

- to display a positive attitude towards a literary work.
- to be well acquainted with the material before they can present it with a simplicity that allows their students to absorb it without ambiguity.
- to gain the students' interest by designing lessons and pre-reading activities that are appealing and insightful.
- to anticipate possible difficulties or misreading of the plot.
- to choose a short story or a novel that is not too much above the students' normal reading proficiency or that is just fruitful providing opportunities for the learners to express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings. Some examples could be *The Other Side* (2001) by Jacqueline WOODSON or *The Daydreamer* (1994) by Ian MCEWAN. The first one is a book for children (ages 6 to 8) told from the perspective of a young African American girl who has always wondered why a fence separates the black side of town from the white side. The second one is for older children (ages between 9 to 12) and it is a lovely collection of stories about the vivid fantasy life of a young boy.

Obviously, the final criteria of suitability depends ultimately on each particular group of students, their needs, interests, cultural background, and language level. In addition, in some cases, it could be a cause of concern that although literature teachers are powerfully enabled by their own knowledge, they can also be constrained by it. If students comment that literature is a “waste of time,” teachers should not react by being disappointed and defensive. Instead, they should manage to channel their passion into discovering new readings and new ways to create better lesson plans (NANCE, 2010: 44). According to Kenneth CHASTAIN, while there is no doubt that the teacher plays a

crucial factor in determining the extent to which students participate and feel motivated, *the teacher's enthusiasm should not reach a level at which the students feel culturally threatened* (Cited in NANCE, 2010: 44). In other words, the teacher should not attempt to indoctrinate students or expect them to emulate his or her own affinity for the foreign language, its literature and its culture.

In many cases, in its initial stages the project of engaging all students requires a process of adaptation and building confidence in the learner. That means that teachers need to develop a range of strategies not only to teach the material, but also to foster student involvement, have them feel comfortable and willing to take risks. Active learning through class discussions and Socratic Seminars are successful ways to achieve this. As Linda J. RICE puts it, *The Socratic Seminar is based on the Greek philosopher Socrates's technique of developing reliable knowledge through the practice and discipline of conversation known as the dialectic* (2006: 11). The main goal in developing this dialectic is to enable students to deepen their understanding of complex ideas of a literary work instead of just merely having their heads filled with *right* answers. The procedure to conduct the Socratic Seminar is based on some basic elements such as the text, the classroom environment and the quality of the questions.

The text (poem, short story, novel, etc.) must be read in advance by all the students and it must contain relevant ideas and values. In this case, we will use *The Other Side* as an example to discuss issues such as friendship, race and discrimination; the classroom environment refers to the arrangement of the desks, ideally into a circle so students can look at each other directly. Lastly, the questions to be discussed can be divided into three categories:

- Opening Questions. Normally, the Socratic Seminar starts when the teacher/facilitator poses a question that any student in the class who read the book could answer. For instance, "This story is really about....," or "What character did you empathize with and why? or "Where do Clover and Annie live? Where do they normally play?" The aim of the opening question is to give every student a chance to talk, be heard, and ideally gain confidence. The role of the teacher at this point in the seminar is only to listen, not to critique or clarify.
- Core Questions. These questions are rooted in the text but are still open-ended and challenging so as to promote a thoughtful dialogue. "How" and "Why" questions work particularly well, and also questions that induce students to evaluate characters' actions, relationships, and motives. For example: "Why are Clover and Annie not allowed to climb over the fence?" "How do they feel when they talk for the first time?" As the seminar progresses, the teacher/facilitator may intervene to ask follow-up questions if the arguments are not clear and to invite reluctant participants to get involved.
- Closing Questions. The aim of these questions is to encourage participants to apply the ideas presented to their particular experiences and to have them express their personal opinions. Answering these closing questions

does not require use of the text but provides students with the chance to share their own perspectives (RICE, 2006: 12). Some examples are: “How do the ideas in the text relate to our lives?” “Is it right that society establishes differences between white and black people?” “Do you think that white and black children can be friends?” “If you could give advice to a character in the book, what advice would you give?”

To sum up, it is important to insist that students who engage in critical reflection through active learning gain the ability to generate their own original ideas. Literature, in this case, constitutes an extraordinary tool to be used in the foreign language class. As MEYERS AND JONES assert, *learning is truly meaningful only when learners have taken knowledge and made it their own* (1993: 20). Inspiring and encouraging students to become active participants, use the target language to talk about their personal views and see language and literature as tools for self-development are not simple and effortless tasks, but these should be the new challenges for teachers, or at least for outstanding teachers. It is not about being the source of knowledge but about having students gain the knowledge by themselves as the practice of the Socratic Seminar illustrates. If achieved, not only would students improve their command of the foreign language but also will probably become lifelong readers of literature. Active learning through the study of literary works and the role of the teacher are thus key in the development of the students’ proficiency level in any second language. That is why literature should have a stronger presence in the foreign language class.

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