

# **The Power of Literature in EFL Classrooms**

**Flora Debora Floris**

English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University,  
Surabaya-Indonesia  
e-mail: debora@peter.petra.ac.id

**Abstract:** This paper proposes the importance of acknowledging literature as one of the best resources for promoting language learning in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. It reviews briefly various theoretical issues in teaching English through literature. Highlights are given to the justifications and guidelines for literature in the language classroom. Finally, the article presents examples of practical teaching and learning tasks based on one specific literary text.

**Key words:** literature, literary text, teaching resource, language learning.

In Indonesia, literature written in English has been rejected as meaningful language usage for EFL classrooms. One of the most common complaints is that teachers and curriculum supervisors find literary texts “difficult”, “hard to understand” and “not relevant” to the students’ lives. Thus, the use of literature in Indonesian EFL classrooms seemed like an irrelevance.

This point of view might be caused by the lack of knowledge on the advantages of literature text, the criteria for selecting literary texts and how to use the texts in classrooms.

This paper examines various issues of using literature in EFL classrooms and presents some plausible tasks which underpin my argument that literature is a valuable source among many different kinds of texts that can be used to promote interesting language activities.

## **THE DAZZLING FEATURES OF LITERATURE**

The use of literature in EFL classes is not without reasons. Compared to informative texts, which are widely used in EFL classes, literary texts have distinctive qualities.

## **Language Enrichment**

Literary texts are not created for the specific purpose of teaching. Instead, they talk about “things which mattered to the author when he wrote them” (Maley, 1989, p. 12). Thus, compared to the language samples in the textbooks, the language is far richer and more varied. Many genuine features of the written language such as “the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas” are presented at many levels of difficulty (Collie and Slater, 1994, p. 5).

By asking students to explore the literary language, actually teachers encourage their students to think about the norms of the language use (Widdowson, 1975, cited in Lazar, 1993, p. 18). Learners are encouraged to familiarize themselves with different language uses, forms or conventions. Such exposure is essential for the learners especially for their language development. Thus, they can appreciate the richness and variety of the language and become more sensitive to the features of it.

## **Cultural Enrichment**

Literature is also a doorway into another culture. Teaching literature enables students “to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space, and to come to perceive traditions of thought, feeling and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows” (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 2). Students learn to see a world through another’s eyes, observing human values and a different kind of living, and discovering that others living in very different societies. They will understand and become broadly aware of the social, political, historical, cultural events happening in a certain society. Through literature, learners can deepen their cultural understanding.

## **Authentic Material**

Literary texts so often touch on common themes and values which range from individual concerns to social issues such as death, love, pollution, ethnic conflicts. Even the genres, conventions and devices portrayed are universal. Poetry has rhythm, rhyme and figurative usage; short stories and novels have plots with crises, conflicts and resolutions. These topics and conventions are “readily recognisable to foreign language learners from their mother-tongue experience” (Maley and Duff, 1989, p. 8).

Moreover, literature includes all possible varieties of subject matter and language which might be intrinsically interesting. The texts are non-trivial because they cover many significant themes and contexts which are missing in most EFL textbooks (Duff and Maley, 1990, p. 6).

Literature exposes students to fresh themes and unexpected language. In this sense, ‘a literary text is authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly’ (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 15). This quality appears to make literature suitable and valuable to language teaching in many contexts and cultures.

### **Personal Involvement**

Literature offers universal themes which are relevant to students’ own experience. It, unlike many teaching inputs, is also a mirror that reflects and heightens each learner’s perception of the social world. Thus, literary texts are open to multiple interpretation and genuine interaction (Duff and Maley, 1990, p. 6). Students may relate the ideas, events and things found in literary texts to their own lives. It will help “to stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities, and to increase their emotional awareness” (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). It also develops learners’ pleasure in reading.

When EFL learners enjoy reading literature and have motivation to interact with a text, they will develop their reading proficiency. When they try to comprehend the meaning of the text, learners must make inferences, drawing both on content of the reading and their own experience. “The reader is placed in an active interactional role in working with and making sense of this (literary) language” (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 15). Students are required to engage in “content-based purposeful learner talk in English”; and teachers act as facilitators to help their learners in discovering the meanings of the texts.

Literature, thus, has a wider function because it fosters personal development in the readers. It helps learners to grow as individuals as well as in their relationships with the people and institutions around them (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 3). This is a crucial part of an education which might not be offered by the textbooks.

From these various discussions, we can conclude that the use of literature yields many benefits. The most important justification is that literature can educate the whole person (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). Literature sharpens linguistic and cognitive skills and provides for some deepening of the students’ understanding of the human condition.

## **“DIFFICULTIES” IN USING LITERARY TEXTS**

Although literature offers many useful benefits, pedagogically there are still some major “difficulties” or “problems” expressed by teachers. It is worth investigating what difficulties encountered. Then we need to remedy these “hazardous diseases” immediately so that they will not damage the benefits that literature embodies.

The most common problem encountered in using literary texts is language. Many EFL teachers and students see literature as a hindrance because the literary language is viewed as incomprehensible. Often teachers and students find the language “does not stick to more common usages, but exploits and even distorts the accepted conventions in fresh and unexpected ways” (Lazar, 1994, p. 115). Besides literary vocabulary and grammatical structures are often considered to be too complicated.

The length of the text is also often seen as one of the major difficulties. For some, longer texts may appear more difficult, whereas for others, shorter texts present more difficulties simply because “they do not offer extended contextual support and repetition which longer texts do” (Duff and Maley, 1990, p. 7).

Another problem of using literary texts in EFL classrooms is concerned with culture. According to Duff and Maley (1990, p. 7), cultural factors can present difficulties in a way that “it is clearly impossible for outsider to share fully the range of references of an insider”. Literary texts can also bring problems if they are viewed as “carrying an undesirable freight of cultural connotations” (Collie and Slater, 1987, p. 2).

In short, we can see that there are some problems involved in using literature in EFL classrooms. Understanding these problems, as noted earlier, will enable us to identify the areas where teachers need to improve most in order to make the best use of literature in English teaching.

## **THE “REMEDIES”**

Some or all of the above factors may render literary texts less acceptable for use in language learning activities. To minimize these difficulties, teachers need to select appropriate literary texts for their students. This is undoubtedly a challenging task for teachers. They need to adopt a set of criteria and priority for choosing a certain kind of literary text.

## **Language Competency**

Teachers should select literary texts within students' language proficiencies because students might feel demotivated if they are not linguistically ready. Carter and Long (1991, p. 5) suggest, "as a general rule, it is better to choose for teaching literary texts which are not too far beyond the students' normal reading comprehension". It is necessary to select literary texts which consist largely of words or expressions sufficiently familiar to the students (Hill, 1992, p. 142). To this, Duff and Maley (1989, pp. 12-13) add that it is not necessary to choose texts, which embody special register (archaism, heightened vocabulary, etc) since by 1920, this kind of language is no longer used by most authors. In short, if the language of the literary text is quite straightforward and simple or not too difficult in regard to the linguistic level of students, students will want to have more access to literary works and find these texts more relevant to their experience.

## **Length of Text**

Since literary texts vary greatly in length, teachers also need to consider whether the texts can be integrated in the amount of class time available. Lazar (1993, p. 55) comments that when selecting literary texts, teachers should bear in mind whether they have enough time available to work on texts in class, how long students have to work on the text at home (reading) and how much background information of the text the teacher needs to give students. If the text is long enough, teachers may conduct various techniques, for example by assigning homework so that they can finish exploring the text on time.

## **Cultural Competency**

The texts selected should also be within the teachers' and students' competence culturally. Culture, which is beyond students' competence, will not motivate the students to read. Hill (1992, p. 142) proposes that the subject matter of the text needs to deal with events or experiences which the readers have been through. Carter and Long (1991, p. 142) share this perspective that the theme of the texts must relate to some extent to the country or culture of the readers. To this, Lazar states,

It is also true that texts which may appear to be very remote in time and place from the world today may still have appeal for students in different countries around the world. This is either because they touch on themes which are relevant to the students, or they deal with human relationships and feelings which strike a chord in the students' own lives (1993, p. 53)

In this sense, it would be meaningful to include literary texts produced by ESL or EFL authors. It is an excellent means of motivating students to read literature whose setting and culture are familiar to them. Moreover, the themes of these texts are mostly relevant to their lives.

### **Students' Interests**

It is also crucial to select texts which can stimulate the kind of personal involvement and arouse the learners' interest. If the learners' ideas, experiences and needs are completely at variance with what they are asked to read, it is useless to expect them to be motivated. On the other hand, if the assigned literary text is meaningful and enjoyable, learners will try to overcome the linguistic obstacles enthusiastically (Collie and Slater, 1994, p. 6-7).

To conclude the discussion of this section, I would like to quote Carter's and Long's (1991, p. 3) arguments that teachers should select literary texts that "students can respond and in which they can participate imaginatively, ..... which will make the reading of literature a memorable, individual and collective experience". There is a wide variety of literary texts available. Thus, the issue of "difficulty" in regard to literary texts should not be exaggerated. Literature might seem to present special difficulties, but carefully chosen, it can be very rewarding.

### **How to Use Literary Texts in Classroom**

In this article, I shall also present and discuss a series of open-ended tasks so that teachers can get concrete ideas about using literature in their EFL classrooms. There are many texts that can be used, but in this article, I decided to choose Agnes Lam's *A Child's Sandal*, a poem which was written in 1998.

It is a contemporary text which has few difficulties of language. Most of the grammatical forms used are the interrogative ones, which are familiar for the intermediate students. *A Child's Sandal* is also a very short text, consists of only 136 words, and most of them are very short, only one or two syllables each. In addition, this poem presents some issues such as suicide, parental love and women's independence. These topics are not foreign to the learners and might appeal to their interests. Agnes Lam's *A Child's Sandal* is not linguistically or conceptually difficult to EFL learners especially those who study in Indonesia.

A student-centered approach is presented in this sample. This approach allows more exploration of the poem, offers the students more opportunities to formulate their own feelings or ideas about the issue(s) as well as to improve their basic skills in the language learning process. To cater various learning styles, it is necessary to devise various kinds of tasks and activities. All of them are carried out in English to immerse students in an English-speaking environment.

Task One:

Students anticipate the content of the poem by doing an exercise:

The title of the poem is "A Child's Sandal". You have two minutes to write down any thoughts which come to your mind in association with it.
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Next, there can be a brief class discussion comparing answers and predicting what the poem is about.

Task Two:

Students compare what they have written or predicted to the original poem:

*A Child's Sandal*  
(by Agnes Lam)

In the early morning,  
walking to the bus,  
I see a yellow sandal  
hanging on the end  
of a branch of a tree  
in the green ravine,  
a size so small it has to be  
for a child of two or three.  
How did it get there?  
Someone picked it up  
from a rubbish dump?  
Too cute to leave behind?  
Was the mother carrying  
so much she did not know  
the child had dropped  
a sandal? Or was it thrown  
through a window from a home  
in the block nearby? If so, why?  
Were there adults quarrelling,  
a child crying at the door?  
Did the man have a mistress  
and the wife wish to kill  
herself? Was it just  
the sandal that was flung?  
Where is the child now?  
Does it have shoes to wear  
somewhere?

Task Three:

Using the poem as their basis, students do the following task:

Work in pairs and discuss the following questions

- What do you understand about the poem?
- Who is the speaker?
- How many characters are described (mentioned) in the poem?
- What are the relationships between the characters?
- What situation does the author try to describe?
- According to you, how could the child's sandal be in a branch of a tree?

At this point, teacher can elicit answers from students, and then explain the background of the poem to the class.

Recently there was a news story about a mother who threw her sons from her apartment building and committed suicide herself. According to the newspapers, she killed herself because she was totally disappointed with her husband. As she hated the feeling of leaving her two sons to be neglected, she unwisely decided to take them with her. The story stirred up a lot of public reaction. A Child's Sandal was written at Victoria Road on 3 November 1998 in the wake of this news. (Source: <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/ls/research/xhk/requiem/sandal2.htm>)

Task Four:

By now, students get a sense of what they have learned about the poem. The next task moves the students out of the poem and back into their own lives. The poem is used as a springboard for discussion of "parental love and responsibilities".

**Group 1:**

Prepare a short argumentative and/or persuasive presentation in which you support the mother's decision. These following proverbs may be used to support your arguments:

- A mother's love will draw up from the depths of the sea (Russian Proverb).
- Your body and every part of it is given by your parents (Hong Kong proverb).

**Group 2:**

Prepare a short argumentative and/or persuasive presentation in which you are against the mother's decision. These following proverbs may be used to support your arguments:

- A child's life does not belong to his/her parents (Thailand Proverb)
- If you have good children, why do you need wealth? And if you have bad children, again why do you need wealth? (Turkish Proverb)

**Task Five:**

Many other different kinds of speaking / writing tasks and issues could be based on the poem. The following task is obviously "more" standard which can be done in written or oral forms. Students could be invited to perform the task alone or in groups.

*Discuss the following points:*

1. According to the author, one of the possible reasons why the wife killed herself and her children was that her husband had a love affair (2<sup>nd</sup> stanza: "Did the man have a mistress and the wife wish to kill herself?"). In some cultures, when a wife finds her husband is having an affair, she is not allowed to show her anger openly. Instead, she is expected (or obliged) to keep silent and do everything as usual.
  - a. What do you think about this "rule"?
  - b. Does your country (or society) have the same "obligation"?
2. Instead of taking such decision as described in the poem, the wife could actually leave (or divorce) the husband.
  - a. What do you think about this alternative solution?

- b. Will it be acceptable by your society?  
(note: In some cultures, a divorce is considered inappropriate and a widow is disrespected).
3. According to the poem, the main reason why the wife committed suicide was because of her dissatisfaction towards her husband. It seems that in some countries (or societies), suicide is considered as the easiest way to solve any problems. In Singapore, for example, the annual suicide average in the past 5 years was 20 youths. Friction with parents and breakups with lovers are the main factors that push Singaporeans to commit suicide (The Nation, 28/02/2003).
- a. Does the same phenomenon also occur in your country (or community)?
- b. If so, why do you think it happen?
- c. If not, according to you, what do people in your community usually do when they have huge burdens?

As shown in this section, Agnes Lam's *A Child's Sandal* was used as the springboard for various classroom activities. EFL learners were given practice in the use of language. This means practice in all four skills. In addition, they were encouraged to become involved in genuine interaction focused on meaning and social issues. Literature indeed offers benefits to students learning EFL.

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided some underlying issues, concerns and ideas involved in using literature in the language classroom. It should be clear then what I am suggesting here is not the study of literature which focuses on the "literariness of the texts" (Maley, 1989, p. 10). The practices that I have mentioned above are example of the use of literature to improve the quality of English language exposure. Short stories, novels and poems provide rich samples of authentic language usage. They also train and teach learners about the value of life itself. Literature serves to develop both social awareness and language competence. Hopefully this article will be beneficial for those who are engaging in the same practice.

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