



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FIRST INTRODUCING FOREIGN-LANGUAGE LITERATURE: BUILDING UPON FAMILIARITY*

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ABSTRACT

In the light of modern techniques of the Communicative Approach in teaching, it is crucial to find better ways to introduce English literature to non-native students at university level, instead of the traditional methods that are built on giving them terminology and definitions to learn, and then names of writers, schools, movements and literary works, as well as dates, to memorise. Observably, the old methods are prone to risk students' interest in the study of literature, especially that this field of study commonly has its own difficulties and challenges even for native speakers. The present paper attempts to set a methodology, based on the author's personal experience in teaching English literature at different universities worldwide for over two decades. The proposed methodology allows students to enjoy, and then participate in, their own act of learning English literature. By means of this methodology, psychological links are built between students and the literature of the foreign language. The proposed methodology makes students enjoy short, uncomplicated and familiar literary works in the target language. Next, classroom discussion and activities enable students to feel at home with this field of study, and enable their instructor to feed them smoothly and gradually with new literary concepts and terminology as tools that enhance students' enjoyment and understanding of the texts at hand.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a common method followed in the teaching of literature to non-native undergraduate students, to start by giving learners terminology and definitions to learn. In this traditional teaching method, students also have to learn names of writers, schools, movements and literary works, and have to memorise lists of characteristics and dates. Even without this burdensome task of memorisation and dry, passive learning, the study of literature naturally has its own difficulties and challenges, even for native speakers. For the non-native, those difficulties are likely to be even more diverse, and the challenges even greater. And the old methods may therefore well risk students' interest in the study of literature. However, the difficulties and challenges of literary reading and learning are not hard to deal with when the student has an amount of artistic enjoyment of the literature at hand.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Depending on their diverse aims, purposes and priorities, various methodologies have been employed in the teaching of literature.

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Amongst those methodologies, there are generally some that focus on students' acquisition of specific information, some that focus on students' language development, and some others targeted at students' personal growth. According to Carter and Long (1991), these are the three basic models for the teaching of literature. The first one of these models views literature as a source of information that the teacher must convey to the students. This information-based approach is teacher-centred because of its main purpose, which gives priority to passing knowledge about literature and the history of literature (Carter, 1988). Lazar (1993) points out that a large input from the teacher is required here, as the content offered for students to learn normally includes diverse literary eras, movements and figures, with the history and characteristics of each, as well as related contextual information. Yet, this approach fits within the traditional views of learning that, according to Dewey (1938), theorise that learning occurs through the transfer of information from knowledgeable sources, such as textbooks or elders, to passive recipients. However, modern learning theories have agreed that students do not learn much by sitting back and listening to teachers, nor by memorising information. It is practically observable that students who are taught literature through this traditional method lack interest in what they study, and that it is only those of them that are more capable of memorisation who can achieve good results, although often without real understanding or enjoyment. The

second model for the teaching of literature, which is the language-based, fits more within modern theories of teaching, in the light of the comparatively more active role given to learners. Here, there is much focus on the relationship between language and literature. Instead of studying literature for the purpose of acquiring facts and information, as in the first model above, this student-centred approach helps students improve their language skills through the medium of literary texts, when these are used as resources that cater for language practice (Carter, 1988; Lazar, 1993). The problem with this approach, though, is that students, while enabled to practice language through the active examination and analysis of literary texts, fail ultimately to develop a real sense for literature per se. Rather, they keep feeling detached from literature, unable to enjoy it and to handle it feelingly. Hence, still more recent approaches of learning have been giving students a yet bigger role in the educational process, holding that students must actively discuss what they are learning, and must be able to relate it to their own experience and personal life (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). In harmony with such later approaches, the personal-growth model of literature teaching provides students with the opportunity to relate, and to personally respond to, the themes and issues that they come across in literary texts (Carter and Long, 1991). This model helps learners practice the target language while they make connections between what they study and their personal lives, opinions and taste. It thus enables them, especially through interpretative activities, of gaining deep learning as they construct knowledge and create meaning from their surroundings. By doing so, they undergo growth in terms of language, emotions and character development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Following the personal-growth model of literature teaching, and in line with the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT), the present study advocates the early introduction of foreign language literature (FLL) to undergraduate students through a method that allows students to feel at home with the foreign literature being studied. The method suggested makes the subject appear recognisable to students, unaggressive towards them, and intimately relatable to what they already know, allowing them to have and exchange personal opinions. This way, students are given the chance to overcome their apprehensions towards the FLL; and by having their attention diverted away from their language difficulties, towards what seems more challenging, and certainly more amusing, they can spontaneously communicate their ideas and practice active learning of the target language. The concept of Active Learning requires teachers within any field of knowledge to cultivate learners' interest in the study they are undertaking, by making students engage in activities, such as reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving, which promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content (Centre for Research on Learning and Teaching, n.d.). An important strategy that helps in this cultivation of learner interest is motivating students to realize their familiarity with the basic concepts of the new field of knowledge. This enables them to relate what they are learning to their personal experience, and thus makes them feel comfortable with the new knowledge they are acquiring (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The fact, however, is that when the field of knowledge that students are entering for the first time is literature of a different culture, written in a foreign language that students still have difficulties with, some teachers have traditionally

been introducing students to the FLL by stuffing them with information and burdening them with definitions, names and dates. Teachers would do this, thinking that there is little or no common ground on which to build their students' sense of familiarity with the topic learned. The challenge faced by such teachers of FLL basically arises from two different reasons combined. The first is that learners often regard the very act of reading in a foreign language as "laborious, unpleasant, and ultimately unsuccessful" (Arnold, 2009: 340), and the second is that, based on their personal experience with literary texts in their mother tongue, students tend to be aware of the more demanding linguistic nature of literary style. Ice-breaking is here much needed to confront students' recoil from the FLL. A successful way to achieve this necessary ice-breaking is by framing the pedagogic content in ways that enable students to discover the relationship of new concepts, learned in or through the FLL, to their own life experiences (Chandler and Adams, 1997). This is achieved by making students realise the intimate connections between some aspects of the FLL, on the one hand, and matters that students have prior knowledge of, as well as things with which they are familiar within the normal setup of their everyday lives, on the other. After they reach such realisation, students can get meaningful and enjoyable engagement in the discovery of the FLL, gradually overcoming the linguistic challenges along the way. Amongst things that people commonly share today, and that may serve as excellent ice-breakers for the introduction of FLL to undergraduate students, are familiar cinema and television productions, as well as iconic stories from children's literature.

A good start can thus be achieved by showing students a familiar story (probably something like *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, or any other classic story with iconic characters from children's literature) in the form of a film or an animation in the target language. This start normally gives students a level of enjoyment. Khatib *et al.* (2011: 215) have empirically proved that motivation is especially achieved when students are exposed to what they really enjoy. During the show, students can have intervals for oral discussion, analysis, guesswork and brainstorming in the target language. They can have these intervals from the moment after they see the title of the show onwards. And they can have the same, orally or in writing, individually, in pairs or in groups, after the end of the show. They may, for example, speak about their likes and dislikes with regard to the story, and about their preferences with regard to this production, or to different productions of the same story maybe. They may be encouraged to express and discuss story analysis and modifications that they may suggest in it. Throughout this ice-breaking stage, the teacher needs to help students out with new terminology to use when they refer to elements of the video—such as setting, theme, characters, plot and narrator. This soon familiarises students with literary concepts and terminology, and gives them the confidence they need in order to find out about the same concepts and terminology by themselves in other, simple literary works, probably, of different genres, offered to them in the target language later on. And here, further terminology may gradually be given to them – such as cast, protagonist, antagonist and point of view. Starting an FLL course in this manner creates an atmosphere of classroom cosiness, of excitement and of productive humour. Telling students next that this classroom experience, of story and film analysis, is in fact a sample of what the study of literature is all about gives students both relief and confidence.

It assures them that they need have no apprehensions concerning the literature of the language that they are still in the process of learning, simply because they all know, and have always enjoyed, literature since early childhood, with bedtime stories and lullabies, and since literature has always been a part of their daily life. Learners thus get artistic enjoyment of the FLL, and find themselves much space for self-exploration and self-expression within it. It is very important here to focus on not imposing meanings and lessons on students, to let them experience literary texts freely, and to allow them to communicate their experience in their own diverse ways (Morson, 2015). Students can go ahead with their active learning of the FLL, forgetting about the language barrier that must otherwise stand between them and the more complex shapes of linguistic usage in the target language.

DISCUSSION

To sum up, with this kind of amusing introduction, at least three significant psychological gains are made by students, which may further hearten them and give them reassurance: one is their proud awareness of their newly gained knowledge of literature and its concepts and terminology, another is their conscious satisfaction with regard to their improving skills in the target language, and lastly is their instinctual self-gratification for having expressed and defended their views amongst their colleagues. Moreover, in agreement with what Van (2009) states, that literature promotes cultural and intercultural awareness, it is a further strong motivation for students to realise their own ability to understand and to harmonise with the foreign culture whose language they are learning. From this point onward, the teacher can go ahead with enriching students' knowledge of more concepts and terminology through classroom discussions of further samples of literary works. General information about the genre exemplified, its main features or its history may, if desired, be given meanwhile through the method of story-telling, by asking students about their own background information, and by letting them make guesses and deductions. Students can be asked to read one or two more literary works on their own, in class or at home, and to make their own written analyses, using the newly learned terminology. Students are later directed to tell their classmates about what they have read, again by using specialised terminology. They may do this by writing a summary or making a book report of the literary text they have read. They are also encouraged to discuss their views with their classmates, to exchange opinions about the main idea, as well as about specific details. Letting them enjoy drawing inferences, by making meaning through syntactic and lexical clues, and letting them make predictions based on their own inferences, can inspire the class with much vigour. The ultimate result of the proposed methodology is a fast and smooth learning process that can guarantee minimum losses on the level of learner interest. This method characteristically demands very little or no preparation from the fresh learners of FLL. It is very different from Maley's critical literary approach (1989), which requires students to have reasonably mastered the target language already, and to be familiar with literary conventions. The proposed methodology is also much less demanding than that which Steinberg (2013) advocates for introducing literature to university undergraduate students. For the latter methodology requires students to be very wide-read and very active, as it focuses on the examination of "Influence" in class – by examining four areas: namely, literary or other works that have influence on the literary work

at hand, the work's influence on learners' critical thinking, literature or other art that grows out of the work at hand, and learners' contribution to the course texts.

CONCLUSION

First introducing students to FLL has to deal with psychological barriers that may naturally stand between students and the teaching material, and has to challenge learning difficulties that students face in the study of more advanced texts in the target language. The learning process in the FLL is further threatened when students are given literary terminology and definitions to learn, as well as lists of names to memorise, of writers, schools, movements, dates, and literary works. Yet, building upon students' familiarity with literature, especially children's literature, besides well-known TV and cinema productions, can create an atmosphere of comfort, of enjoyment and of excitement. This kind of start is least demanding for students, and it provides them with much space for self-exploration and self-expression, and guides their steps into the field of the FLL smoothly and with extra psychological benefits that would make them practice the foreign language more actively.

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