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Literature in the ESL Classroom

Sandra McKay

This paper examines the pros and cons of using literature in an ESL classroom. The author argues that if literary texts are to be used successfully in the classroom, they must be carefully selected and approached in a manner which promotes an aesthetic interaction between the reader and the text. The paper concludes with a specific example of how a literary text might be approached so as to foster this type of interaction.

Should literature be part of an ESL curriculum? Today with the current focus in ESL on meeting the particular academic and occupational needs of the students, it is easy to view any attention to literature as unnecessary. Is there a rationale for including literature in the curriculum?

Let's first examine the common arguments *against* using literature. The most common ones are the following. First, since one of our main goals as ESL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. Second, the study of literature will contribute nothing to helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. Finally, literature often reflects a particular cultural perspective; thus, on a conceptual level, it may be quite difficult for students. These arguments certainly need to be addressed if we are to reach a decision as to whether or not to use literature.

Clearly, we all share the objective of promoting our students' awareness of the structure of the language. However, there are as Widdowson (1978:3) points out two levels of linguistic knowledge: the level of *usage* and the level of *use*. According to his definition, *usage* involves a knowledge of linguistic rules, whereas *use* entails knowing how to use these rules for effective communication. Can a literary text contribute to a knowledge of either one?

Most present day literary texts assume that literature can provide a basis for extending language usage. Many of these texts focus on the particular grammatical points that are salient in the text (see, for example, Fassler and Lay 1979). Furthermore, vocabulary expansion is dealt with by attention to word forms and common expressions. Povey (1972:187), in summarizing the aims of using literature in ESL classes, argues that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact

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syntax." Later I will examine the wisdom of using literature as a basis for teaching usage.

Whereas literature has traditionally been used to teach language usage, rarely has it been used to develop language use. Yet the advantage of using literature for this purpose is that literature presents language in discourse in which the parameters of the setting and role relationship are defined. Language that illustrates a particular register or dialect is embedded within a social context, and thus, there is a basis for determining why a particular form is used. As such, literature is ideal for developing an awareness of language use.

A second common argument against using literature is that it will do nothing toward promoting the students' academic and/or occupational goals. First of all, it is important to remember that one need not assume that literature be studied to the exclusion of other types of texts. Hence, it need not be a question of either literature or prose. Rather, the question is one of whether or not the study of literature can in any way contribute to academic and/or occupational goals. Certainly, in so far as literature can foster an overall increase in reading proficiency, it will contribute to these goals. An evaluation of reading proficiency rests on an understanding of what is involved in the reading process. Widdowson (1979:74) and others regard reading "not as a reaction to a text but as *interaction* between writer and reader mediated through the text." This interaction, it seems to me, occurs on two levels: linguistic and conceptual. In other words, reading necessitates the ability to interact with a text by decoding the language and comprehending the concepts presented. Furthermore, these two levels often interact. Johnson (1981), in examining the effects of the linguistic complexity and the cultural background of a text on the reading comprehension of Iranian ESL students, found that the relationship between these variables is complex; in some instances familiarity with the text made it easier for students to deal with complex syntactic structures, but this familiarity also resulted in students' going beyond the text in interpreting it. What is critical in selecting a text is to examine it for both its linguistic and conceptual difficulty. Whereas readability formulas provide some index of the former, unfortunately we have little to aid us in dealing with the latter.

The perspective of reading as *interaction* presupposes, or course, that a reader is willing to interact with a particular text. It is here that the motivational factors involved in reading become critical. As Gaies (1979:48) points out, "since the reading process . . . is the interaction of a reader and a text, we stand in equal need of more research on the affective, attitudinal and experiential variables which would differentiate individual or groups of learners in terms of their willingness and ability to decode written input in a second language." For some students, literature may provide the affective, attitudinal and experiential factors which will motivate them to read. As such, literary texts can aid in the development of reading proficiency and in this way contribute to a students' academic and occupational objectives.

Finally, critics of the use of literature maintain that to the extent that literary texts reflect a particular cultural perspective, they may be difficult for ESL students to read. Clearly, this can be a problem. The question is whether or not any benefits can arise from examining the cultural assumptions of a piece of literature. Marshall (1979:333), in using English literature with Puerto Rican students, found that as she worked to help students overcome the difficulties of the text, her own appreciation of the text was clarified and her respect for the students' own cultural framework enhanced. Thus, literature may work to promote a greater tolerance for cultural differences for both the teacher and the student. Northrop Frye (1964:77) summarizes this benefit of literature in the following manner: "So you may ask what is the use of studying the world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good. One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance."

A second benefit of struggling with the potential cultural problem of literature is that it may promote our students' own creativity. Again as Frye puts it (1964:129), "It is clear that the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the students." Thus, whereas students may indeed be unfamiliar with some of the cultural assumptions in literature, the advantages of confronting these assumptions may be well worth the struggle.

In summary, literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use level. Secondly, to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. Finally, an examination of a foreign culture through literature may increase their understanding of that culture and perhaps spur their own creation of imaginative works.

Selecting Literature

The key to success in using literature in the ESL class seems to me to rest in the literary works that are selected. A text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits. One common method of solving the potential problem of linguistic difficulty is the simplification of the text. There are, however, serious disadvantages to using this approach. As Honeyfield (1977:434-35) points out, simplification tends to produce a homogenized product in which the information becomes diluted. The additional words in the text tend to spread the information out rather than to localize the information. Furthermore, the simplification of syntax may reduce cohesion and readability. Since proficient readers rely heavily on localized information and cohesive devices, deleting these elements will contribute little to the development of reading skills.

Are there any alternatives to using simplified versions? One obvious solution is to select texts which are relatively easy according to readability counts. However, such counts typically are based on some measure of vocabulary difficulty and some indice of syntactic complexity, such as sentence length. In dealing with literature, these counts, of course, give no indication of the complexity of the text in terms of plot, character, or cultural difficulty.

A second solution is to select texts from literature written for young adults. Such literature, according to Donelson and Nilsen (1980:14-15), tends to have the following characteristics. Frequently, the theme of such literature deals with the problem of personal growth and development. Furthermore, most literature for young adults tends to be relatively short, and the characters usually limited to a small cast of characters with a young adult as the central character. Most importantly, from an ESL perspective, many of the books tend to be stylistically less complex.

In addition to selecting literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, it is important to select themes with which the students can identify. Certainly, one common experience of most ESL students is their struggle with a language and culture with which they are unfamiliar. Thus, literature which deals with either of these themes should be highly relevant to them.

Using Literature in the Classroom

Selecting the text is only the first step. An equally important issue is how to deal with such texts in the classroom. Here, I think Rosenblatt's (1978:24) distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading is critical. She defines efferent reading (from the Latin "to carry away") as reading in which the reader is concerned with what she will carry away. In aesthetic reading, on the other hand, "the reader's primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading." In both cases the text is merely the stimulus; the reader creates her own poem as she interacts with the text bringing her own experience to bear. For Rosenblatt, this interaction is an event in time involving a specific reader, and a specific text at a specific time and place; if any of these are changed, there is a different event. Hence, while a text may not be involving for an individual at a certain time, later the same person, by bringing additional experience to the text, may find it involving. Because of this, Rosenblatt suggests that a student typically be allowed to put aside a particular piece of literature, an option which we rarely allow our students. Widdowson makes a similar point when he states (1978:80), "to present someone with a set of extracts and to require him to read them not in order to learn something interesting and relevant about the world but in order to learn something about the language being used is to misrepresent language use to some degree."

In short, the classroom approach to efferent and aesthetic reading must of necessity be very different. Exploring the usage of a text which is being

approached efferently is in keeping with the aim of using a text to gain information. On the other hand, since in aesthetic reading the experience is primary, this is where a classroom approach should begin and language usage should be explored only to the extent that it is relevant to that experience. The fact is that literary experiences outside of a classroom proceed in this manner. What is most important to a reader in aesthetic reading is the enjoyment attained by interacting with the text. Usage comes into play only when it impedes or highlights that experience. To do other than this in the classroom results in what Widdowson (1979:80) terms a lack of authenticity i.e. an inappropriate relationship between the text and the reader.

Application

Let us examine how a particular literary passage might be approached aesthetically rather than efferently. The following selection is taken from *Sweet Promised Land* by Robert Laxalt (1957:62-63). The book is a biography of Laxalt's father, a Basque sheepherder who came to America when he was sixteen. As Laxalt puts it, "My father was a sheepherder, and his home was the hills. So it began when he was a boy in the misted Pyrenees of France, and so it was to be for most of his life in the lonely Sierra of Nevada." The following passage describes his father at the age of sixty-three in an exclusive New York restaurant on the way back to his homeland for the first time since he came to America.

We made it through the soup and the salad without incident. It began when the waiter came to take away our salad plates and put on others for the main course. He collected John's and mine, and then reached for my father's. But he could not lift it, because my father was holding it to the table with both hands.

"I'm sorry," said the waiter. "I thought you were finished."

"I am finished," said my father.

"Oh," said the waiter, and again reached for the salad plate. My father held on.

"May I take your plate, sir?" said the waiter.

"No," said my father mildly.

The waiter stood in confused silence for a moment. "But I have to put another plate there, sir."

My father shook his head. "It's all right," he said. "Don't go to any bother."

The waiter blinked and then smiled weakly. "Oh, it's no bother at all," he said, and again reached for the plate.

This time, my father put his hands over the plate to protect it. The waiter stopped short and straightened up. He looked at us in something akin to frenzy, and John gestured with his head. The waiter retreated to the back of the room and stood there watching us from long distance. He was pale and he still had a plate in his hands.

"Pop," said John, "Why don't you give him your plate?"

My father shrugged. "It's clean enough," he said.

This time John blinked. "I don't understand what you mean".

"They shouldn't waste a plate," said my father. "This one's fine."

John regarded my father for a long moment. "It's really no bother," he said. "They've got a washer back there that does all the work."

"Well, they might run short," my father said.

"I'm telling you, Pop," said John. "There's no danger." He took a deep drag of his cigarette and leaned forward again. "Pop," he said. "You're going to get that waiter in trouble."

"What?" said my father concernedly.

"It's this way," said John. "They're supposed to put a new plate on for each course. That's the way the management wants it. If the waiter doesn't do it and one of the managers sees him, he gets fired on the spot."

"I never heard of such a thing," my father said.

"It's true," said John. "That waiter's probably worried plenty by now."

"Well hell," said my father. "Tell him to take it then."

One follow up activity that is often used in ESL texts is to begin with comprehension questions like the following.

Was this the first incident the father had with the waiter?

What did the waiter say when the father refused to give him his plate?

How many times did the waiter attempt to take the plate?

The problem with such questions is that they seek to determine, in an efferent mode, the information that the student is carrying away from the text. Whereas this knowledge may be very important in reading scientific or business texts, this passage was obviously not written to relay the information that is questioned above.

A second common activity is to use the text to promote language skills on the level of usage. Thus, the use of the present and past tense might be explored. Students could be asked to circle all the verbs in the past tense, to list the irregular past tense verbs, and to explain why the present tense is used in sentences such as the following: "They're supposed to put a new plate on for each course. That's the way the management wants it." However, since the text was not written to exemplify a contrast between the use of the present and past tense in English, such activities create what Widdowson terms an inappropriate relationship between the reader and the text.

Another alternative, which unfortunately is less frequently used, would be to explore the language of the text in terms of language use. In this case, students could write down all of the comments made by the waiter, resulting in the following list.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were finished."

"May I take your plate, sir."

"But I have to put another plate there, sir."

"Oh, it's no bother at all."

Then the class could discuss why the waiter used "sir" and "may I." They might also be asked to suggest the tone of voice used by the waiter in making these comments. Such activities would naturally result in an exploration of the role relationship of the father and the waiter, and could ultimately lead to an examination of a central concern of the passage; namely, the father's refusal to let the waiter take his plate and even more importantly the question of *why* he refuses to do so. Since any reader interacting with the text

aesthetically cannot overlook this question, this is where an examination of the passage should begin. This discussion may lead back to a closer reading of the text, as readers point to what the father says about his refusal.

In aesthetic reading, a reader often relates his world of experience to the text. After reading the passage, students might be asked if anything similar has ever happened to them. The following response by one student to *Sweet Promised Land* was based on such a shared experience.

The essay which I enjoyed reading the most is *Sweet Promised Land* because it is closely related to my family. The story of *Sweet Promised Land* talks about a father who came to the United States, but he is not fully adjusted in this new culture. He doesn't let the waiter take his plate, and he also wound his wallet with a black inner-tube band. As I remember, my mother needed to do that too when we just came over to the United States. She still puts a big band around her wallet.

Since in aesthetic reading, readers often make judgments about the characters, another follow up activity might involve having the students comment on their opinion of the father, the son, or the waiter. Furthermore, in aesthetic reading a reader often fantasizes as to what he would do in a similar situation. Hence, students could be asked what they would have done if they had been the father, the son or the waiter. Such discussion, it seems to me, goes much further toward promoting an interaction between the reader and the text than an exploration of the usage in the passage.

An interaction with a literary text depends on a readers familiarity with the cultural assumptions in it. The excerpt from *Sweet Promised Land* contains several specific cultural assumptions. It is important that students understand these for as Allen (1975:111) puts it, "Literature is a facet of a culture. Its significance can be best understood in terms of its culture, and its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted." In this passage it is assumed that the reader understands that in a high class restaurant a waiter must at all costs be polite, that the number of dishes and the amount of work needed to keep these dishes clean is inconsequential, and that loud confrontations are generally avoided. The son is aware of these assumptions, whereas the father obviously is not. Furthermore, since the son is aware of the problem, he tries as unobtrusively as possible to resolve the conflict.

In order to prepare students to deal with these assumptions, they might be asked to indicate if the following items are typical (T) or unusual (U) in exclusive American restaurants.

- ___1. The number of dishes is kept to a minimum so as to reduce costs.
- ___2. Each course is brought on a separate plate.
- ___3. It is appropriate for a waiter to insist that he do his job even if the customer is unhappy.
- ___4. It is appropriate for a customer to insist that a restaurant alter its standard procedures to meet his wishes.

—5. Any conflict between waiter and customer is resolved in as quiet a manner as possible.

If a student is unaware of any of these assumptions, the context of the passage will help to illustrate what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. In this way the passage can serve to clarify the cultural expectations of a particular social context.

Conclusion

Literature does indeed have a place in the ESL curriculum. For many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. Our success in using literature, of course, greatly depends upon a selection of texts which will not be overly difficult on either a linguistic or conceptual level. Ultimately, however, if we wish to promote truly aesthetic reading, it is essential that literature be approached not efferently, but in a manner which establishes a personal and aesthetic interaction of a reader and a text.

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