Using literature in ELT

Geoff Hall

Introduction

Literature can inspire, excite and intrigue, and engagement and inspiration are desirable in education of all kinds. In this chapter, I argue that using literature in ELT can be useful to expand language learners’ vocabulary, awareness of register, genre and linguistic knowledge generally. But a stronger claim that I shall also make is that the ways in which language is used in literary texts are actually centrally relevant to the needs of students in a wide range of situations in everyday life.

Historically, as the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement grew in Western countries from the 1970s (see Thornbury, this volume), literature often came to be seen as less relevant to ELT. For advocates of CLT, grammar-translation was ‘the enemy’ (simplistically speaking), and grammar-translation had always relied on literature; indeed, for many advocates of grammar-translation, the reading of literature had been seen as the ultimate reason for studying a foreign language. Thus, literature fell out of favour in ELT, whilst CLT concentrated on speaking, understood as everyday information exchanges, and reading and writing were initially neglected in favour of more immediate ‘high surrender’ practical speaking activities (Wilkins, 1976).

More generally, with increasingly dominant instrumental and vocational views of education in many parts of the world, literature has often fallen under suspicion across both L1 and L2 curriculums. Yet literature is still often taught for its own sake, particularly in less well-resourced parts of the world, its value unquestioned as reading material or for vocabulary development. Even in these contexts, however, clearly defined pedagogical principles for teaching literature or teaching with literature are often not articulated, which in some ways is as undesirable as not using literature at all.

Yet a more recent position on literature use, with the rise of pedagogical concerns about identity and the feelings of learners, resonates with ideas of learner-centredness, reader response and suspicion of classic literary canons and, from this, to creative writing, drama workshops and altogether more active and interrogative approaches to literature study which will be discussed later in this chapter.

A representative hostile view to the use of literature comes from Horowitz (1990), who argues that, even if ‘necessary’ language could be located incidentally and with difficulty in some literary texts, there are surely easier ways to teach it. According to this view, literature is a specialist concern for some advanced and thus probably older students only, most likely those intending to be teachers. At the school level, on the other hand, communicative classes offer students basic
Using literature in ELT

vocabulary and grammar, with language taught for the purpose of information exchange in the ‘real world’, and ignore literature. This supposedly more practical language of service encounters and the like (restaurants, hotels and stations) enables only limited meaningful engagement with the values and informing ideas of cultural groups who use the L2, as documents like the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001) acknowledge. Users of an L2 will often want meaningful relations (Hanauer, 2012) with other users of that language, as well as wanting to use the language to elaborate their own identities and desires (Kramsch, 2006, 2009). This is where literature can provide an invaluable resource.

‘Literature’, in current approaches to language teaching and ELT, is emphatically literature with a small ‘l’ (McRae, 1991), texts which use language imaginatively or creatively but are not necessarily ‘classic’ texts. Thus, literary texts use language in ways that are better related to other uses of language such as advertising or conversation than split off as somehow utterly different or even qualitatively superior (as a ‘classics’ or ‘canonical’ view might imply). From this viewpoint, stories, biography, travel literature, journalism, play scripts, diaries and blogs are all literature. If *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe or any other classic writing is to be valued more highly than other texts, this is something students should be encouraged to do for themselves rather than just accepting hand-me-down knowledge. From this perspective, therefore, literature can be used to engage and motivate students, to get them to notice and work with language forms expressively, to explore new personal and imaginative worlds and to communicate authentically, for, as Heath (1996: 776) notes: “Literature has no rival in its power to create natural repetition, reflection on language and how it works, and attention to audience response on the part of learners.”

Two basic questions can be asked about the use of literature in ELT (Carter, 2007: 4):

1. **What** is literature, and what therefore should be **selected** as a basis for teaching literature, and why?
2. How should it be taught and what is its overall place, internationally, in language education?

I will address these two essential questions in turn. The chapter initially examines the language of literature before considering how using literature might support L2 learning. The chapter then examines approaches to literature reading before clarifying how literature is best selected and used in ELT. I conclude the chapter with some more recent developments and likely future directions for uses of literature in ELT.

**The language of literature**

Literature has sometimes been assumed to use language in distinct ways and with unique features – and not features most obviously required for English language learners. Yet research has revealed that it is not so much that the language of literary texts is not to be found in other texts (e.g. unusual vocabulary or grammar) but rather that language tends to be used in different ways, for different purposes, and with greater variety. This unusual range of otherwise representative language used in literary texts can be seen as an advantage to the learner, if admittedly sometimes also a challenge – but it is the right kind of challenge for those who need to pay attention to language and to expand their repertoires beyond a minimal ‘survival’ core.

Adamson (1998), for example, demonstrates increasing vernacularisation across all genres of literature in English; modern English literary texts, including poetry and drama as well as novels and short stories, are increasingly characterised by ordinary, everyday language, including more
spoken forms. Dorst (2015) shows that literary texts do not use more metaphors and figurative language than other kinds of writing; rather, metaphors in literary texts are more innovative (and so draw attention to themselves) and tend to be signalled more self-consciously. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated the pervasively metaphorical nature of all everyday language use, and Carter (2004) identified the inherent and routinely creative uses of language in everyday exchanges between users; literary texts reflect and develop this. Meanwhile, dialects, sociolects, professional and occupational registers, representations of accent, style and variation, and genre mixing are to be found deployed throughout modern literature, but not in isolation, and often in foregrounded and highly contextualised ways which lend themselves well to learning. The jargon of a lawyer may be used for memorably comic purposes, or a careful formal register may show uneasy relationships between characters that the reader cares about. A character is shown moving from job interview to chat with a friend or a stranger on a train, with relevant changes in dialect and sociolect. Literature artfully prompts the attentive reader to notice the particular nature of any specialised language it uses, and more generally how language varies according to contexts of use.

Language use in literature, then, is uniquely representative of the wider language, and authors are able to draw on all the resources of that language for creative or imaginative purposes. It is also a use of language which often prompts its readers to consider its form and use particularly carefully (for example, ‘why did s/he use that word?, what exactly does that mean?, why is that term repeated?’). Literary language will often ‘draw attention to itself’ (Jakobson, 1960). No other use of language does this to the same degree, and literature therefore offers unique ‘affordances’ (van Lier, 2000) for language learners who need to cope with language as it is used and as it can be used and to begin to use it for themselves for their own purposes. The language of literature is ‘authentic’ in that sense, i.e. if it is engaged with by learners. And, in fact, literary language is designed to prompt engagement.

Using literature: perspectives from second language learning theory and research

Literature and ‘noticing’

Second language learning has traditionally been studied from cognitive and psychological perspectives within SLA research. These approaches give some good theoretical grounds for using literature in ELT. Literary texts require or can prompt deep reader or listener cognitive engagement – interaction with meaning but also with, or through, close attention to the linguistic forms of the text (i.e. ‘focus on form’, see also Svalberg, this volume). ‘Noticing’ (Schmidt, 1990), or paying conscious attention to a form that is not known or not known well enough and seeing how it can be used to make meaning, seems to be a precondition for much successful language learning. Readers of literature often recall exactly the words of a favourite or meaningful literary text or extract (Nell, 1988); those words in that order are particularly effective for them. Reading studies have recorded the tendency of readers to slow their reading rate as they read passages they later report to be meaningful, pleasurable or in some way important (Miall, 2007). Precise words matter, and favourite or enjoyed passages are often read more than once. This type of literary reading favours memorability and thus L2 learning. Additionally, the teacher using literature can exploit the importance of using this word rather than that one in a literary work (e.g. the choice of one tense rather than another that could have been selected, or the use of an indefinite not a definite article, a lexical choice, a choice of word order etc.).

Learning requires attention, then, but also requires repeated acts of attention (Ellis, 2002, 2005). In SLA research, ‘connectionism’ argues for the importance of repetition and recycling, or near
recycling, of language in the acquisition of, for example, grammatical patterns, formulaic 'chunks' of language, collocations and specific lexical items (ibid.). Attending to a word or form once is not enough; nor is uninterested noticing (Schmidt, 1990). Thus, 'foregrounding', a basic feature of many literary texts in which the text by design draws attention to its linguistic forms (words and structures, sounds, spelling and so forth) signposts language for learners, enabling them to give the necessary attention to relevant linguistic features. This foregrounding often works in practice as exact or near repetition or other patterning, or through innovative figurative uses of language.

For example, compare, at a more obviously literary level, advertising, or the refrains and choruses of poems, ballads and lyrics right through to the repetitive prose styles of Dickens or D. H. Lawrence. ‘Beans Meanz Heinz’ (an advertising slogan from the UK with obvious phonological patterning) is a linguistically similar phenomenon to “And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep”, the conclusion of Frost’s poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, in which a reader is likely to be prompted to pause and to reflect upon the deliberate repetition. Teachers can draw attention to patterning in a text through prediction activities or extensions of the technique. Rhyme, alliteration and assonance are all instances of such repetition, which can be used to teach phonology but also to show the way sound is used in the service of meaning. Similarly, Boers and colleagues have shown how phonologically motivated many idioms are in English; we remember such sayings often at least partly because of the insistent sound patterning (e.g. shop till you drop, happy as Harry) (see, for example, Boers et al., 2014). As noted above, everyday language use is surprisingly poetic, and awareness of such poetics, in principle as well in specific examples, can help both teachers and students.

**Tolerance of ambiguity**

Within research into individual differences (see MacIntyre, Gregersen and Clément, this volume), ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ is seen as a positive trait for language learners (Chapelle and Roberts, 1986) and reflects the extent to which learners persist with meaning-making activity even when their comprehension is limited. Emmott (1997) and others have shown how ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ is needed for the successful reading of much literature, and indeed that, arguably, a reader can become more tolerant of ambiguity through repeated engagement with literary texts and with the encouragement of teachers and more confident peers. Writers of detective novels will plant clues which may or may not help the reader solve the crime – an apparently ‘good’ character turns out to be less trustworthy than we thought, or a first-person narrator, the reader gradually realises, does not fully understand her own situation or fully tell the truth about it. These are all instances of the kind of tolerance of ambiguity successful literary reading requires and develops, and which, it is argued, can also enhance second language learning. (Of course, cinema and many other art forms often require the same tolerance of ambiguity – throughout the chapter, my idea of the ‘literary’ needs to be understood very broadly.)

Beyond processing and close attention to surface linguistic forms, approaches to second language learning also emphasise the value of learning to infer, i.e. ‘to read between the lines’, and to understand the significance of words beyond any literal or apparent meaning they might seem to have; this might be termed ‘active meaning-making’ (Grabe, 2009). All help fix language in the mind of learners more securely (Grabe, ibid.; Alderson, 2000), and literature scores highly here again. Sustained attention to language helps retention in longer-term memory and a fuller understanding of how words and expressions can be used, and this can be enhanced by appropriately designed tasks. Thus, literature may be of help to learners if tasks can be designed to prompt active engagement with the texts chosen.
Emotional investment

The desire to ‘turn the page’, to finish the book as well as to re-read and to tell others about one’s reading, including emotional involvement in it, are all signs of the kind of engagement that will facilitate language learning. Ideas of ‘hot cognition’, i.e. the relevance of emotions to thinking and understanding, also recognise this: reading, just as with other uses of language, can set the heart racing, make us physically uncomfortable or affect our feelings and bodies in multiple ways. It will hardly surprise educators to be told that feelings are very much linked to learning (Sanford and Emmott, 2012).

Participation in a new community

Emerging relatively recently within the research literature, social, sociocultural or sociocognitive perspectives (see, for example, Negueruela-Azarola and García, this volume) provide further insights into second language learning. Learners in such a view are ‘individuals’ rather than brains (‘cognition’), and individuals in turn are social beings (see, for example, Atkinson, 2011). Learning takes place in and through particular contexts and situations, which are important for the forms and directions learning will take. Language learning is figured as appropriation or participation in a new community of practice (Lantolf, 2000: 20) or even imaginative identification (Kramsch, 2009; also Dörnyei, 2010, on motivation). From this perspective, the task of the language learner is to find a voice through the new language, and this will be done by interacting under given conditions with speakers of the new language. Thus, we learn a new language by using it meaningfully with others. Reading is just such an interaction, as is talking about the reading we have been doing.

Literature offers language that learners can engage with in various ways, whether it be immersion, resistance, pleasure or irritation, but all these responses engage the individual in significant ways, with ideas that matter to them (see Duff and Maley (1990/2007) and Maley (2001) on ‘non-triviality’ of literary texts). Literature can explore what it means to be human, including death, life and love; illness and health; what is right and wrong; social identity, including gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation; and feelings and emotions. Such issues can matter to a learner at a deeper level than a typical communicative ‘directions to the station’-type task. Literary texts can motivate language learners to want to understand, to express themselves and to define their own position and new identity by using what the L2 and its texts offer. Thus, a frequent learner comment in second language creative writing programmes (Hanauer, 2010; Iida, 2012) is ‘I could never have said / would never have thought of that in my own language.’

The work of Norton (2000) on gender and identity as factors in language learning or Pavlenko (2005), for example, on emotions in learner perspectives on language learning, or Dörnyei and Ushioda (2010) on the highly dynamic and contextual nature of motivation (see also Lamb, this volume) show how important feelings and specific learning situations and experiences are in determining the relation of a learner to a language and its texts. Wanting to engage with that language and to use it for one’s own purposes are fundamental to success in language development, and imaginative and creative texts can be central in promoting and supporting such engagement (Kramsch, 2009).

Language play

One aspect of this engagement with a new language is the widely-observed phenomenon of ‘language play’ (Cook, 2000) – any teacher will have noticed instances of learner humour, repetitions or deliberate variations, language play as puns, (mis-)translations, mispronunciations, invented possible words or structures on a daily basis, both in classrooms and beyond. Language
play can help learners ascertain the range of what is more or less acceptable or innovative in a language and learn how a language works by taking it apart and putting it back together again. The importance of language play in facilitating language development is noted by Lantolf (1997: 19), who writes, “I do not believe that language play, in and of itself, leads to successful SLA. . . . I do believe, however, that without language play learning is unlikely to occur.” Similarly, Cook (2000: 204) notes that “There is good reason to regard [second] language play both as a means and an end of language learning” and that an “ability to play with language” could even be used as a “test of proficiency” (Lantolf and Cook both quoted in Belz, 2002: 204).

Research into ‘language play’ sees play as intrinsic to language learning. The ultimate examples of such ludic texts, once again, are broadly literary texts, whether jokes, stories and riddles, or puns or other ‘bending’ of the possibilities the language offers. This is the case in L2 learning as much as in first language development. Beard (1995) reports the links in L1 development between early language play and later success with literacy, vocabulary size and overall ultimate educational success. While less well researched, similar processes can be expected to apply to second language learner development.

**Approaches to literature reading in ELT**

Research into student attitudes (e.g. Martin and Laurie, 1993) reports that most language students are unconvinced when it comes to the use of literature in language education. They can be convinced by good teachers using literature imaginatively, but generally feel that it is not an efficient way to learn a second or foreign language. The teacher who intends to use literary texts in class will thus need to demonstrate how or why uses of literature are worthwhile. Similarly, there is real evidence of student resistance to non-standard English features in literary texts (Hoffstaedter-Kohn, 1991), rather as research shows teachers and students sceptical about the claims of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) or doubting other ‘World Englishes’ variations (Jenkins, 2015). A challenging but important task for the English language teacher, today more than ever, is to teach the need to engage with English as a world language and to be at least aware of its full range of variation, as evidenced by literary texts of all kinds.

**Reading literature in the classroom**

Reader response, as developed by early theorists in literary studies such as Iser or Rosenblatt, generally informs uses of literature in ELT classrooms today, where more stylistic or ‘close reading’ approaches dominated in the past. Iser (1978) noted the need for successful readers of literature to actively fill in gaps in what the text tells us (i.e. to infer – see above), while Rosenblatt (1978/1994) emphasised that reading a literary text was an interactive aesthetic experience, not an exercise in fact finding. For Rosenblatt, what matters is the experience and what reading the text does for a reader, not reaching the meaning approved by one’s teachers. As with approaches to first language reading, in methodological approaches to the reading of literature in a second language, educationists have generally moved toward such reader response approaches, particularly at school level, where the learner-reader is encouraged to express personal ideas and reactions to texts (‘response’) based on their knowledge and experiences up to that point.

Reader response approaches have been characterised by awareness of the importance of the reader to the construction of literary meaning. Not all readers read in the same way, and this can be an advantage rather than a problem in the classroom. Elliot (1990) and Ali (1994), for example, testify to the interest in and applications of reader response approaches in ELT. In the same tradition, Sell (1995) reports positively on reader response inspired uses of literary texts.
throughout ELT education in Finland, one of the most highly rated education systems in the world, from kindergarten to university. The relative lack of articles since the 1990s testifies to the acceptance of reader response since that time though the approach is not without problems. Some, for example, question the limitations of a personal approach to literature reading, and thus, reader response could still stand further investigation (Hall, 1999, 2015; Harding, 2014). The approach is seen as learner-centred and more likely to promote real and authentic communication in a language classroom, with similar advantages for second language learning to those claimed for communicative language teaching. ‘Learning from literature’ is promoted over ‘teaching literature’. Lessons led by reader response approaches will feature much tentative exploration of individual readings, mediated by group work and further discussion and reflection as consensus emerges on the meaning of a text or until agreement to differ is reached, ideally all with continual reference back to the text itself: prompting reference to the text may be the role of the teacher in such discussions.

A key affordance of the literary text is for personally meaningful discussions. Kim (2004, concerning ELT) or Scott and Huntington (2007, concerning French language) show how more valuable text-based or text-originating discussions can proceed from this kind of open approach. Indeed, the Scott and Huntington article is particularly interesting not only because the classes described are low proficiency, but also for showing that a teacher can help facilitate, or in Vygotskian terms ‘scaffold’ (Vygotsky, 1978), more valuable discussions than took place in groups where a teacher was not present to facilitate. Where no teacher was present, the learners became fixated on linguistic detail and indeed on basic ‘comprehension’ with an apparent reluctance to enter into more significant discussions, though they could do this when led. There is often a tension between letting readers make sense for themselves, and ‘teaching’ the students what a text is about and why it is valued within the culture that originally produced it (typically in ELT, Britain or the USA).

Second language literature reading outside the classroom

When individuals attempt literature reading for themselves outside of classrooms, cognitive studies using ‘think out loud’ procedures (ToL), protocols or recalls (Gass and Mackey, 2000; Bowles, 2010) typically show (a) intensive processing of the language of literary texts, particularly of poetry or shorter texts, and (b) attempts to make connections both linguistically and to the world knowledge of the reader (see Hall, 2015, for further discussion). Where such solitary engagement with the text occurs, it would seem to be useful for language learning, at least in terms of the development of reading skills and incidental acquisition of vocabulary or structures. Elsewhere, emotions, pleasure, curiosity and engagement with characters (see, for example, the empathy research of Sklar, 2013) are all evidence of a text’s potential suitability for language teaching and learning. Naturally, also reported are the difficulties of reading in a second language, including issues surrounding the additional demands on the working memory (see Collins and Marsden, this volume, for further discussion of working memory) and online cognition of the L2 user. These very real difficulties should never be underestimated. Readers of literature in a second language will usually need a lot of support and confidence-building activities before they will successfully and independently read extensively outside the classroom.

Extensive reading

Extensive reading is the general heading given to the reading of longer and complete texts, ideally for pleasure and for general understanding rather than to examine every detail (i.e. ‘intensive
Using literature in ELT

reading’), which is more likely to happen in class (Day and Bamford, 1998). Literature use in ELT can clearly be pursued through extensive reading, as advocated by, for example, Elley and Manghubai (1983), Mason and Krashen (1997) and Day et al. (2011), and by Pigada and Schmitt (2006) researching incidental vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading. There is no doubt that many foreign language readers find increasingly well-written ‘readers’ specifically developed for the ELT market worthwhile, even if some educators hold serious reservations about the simplified texts often found, and there is still much to understand, for example concerning the contribution of glosses, marginal notes and other variations in presentation of these materials. Extensive reading of complete stories outside the classroom builds confidence, builds familiarity with the foreign language and facilitates the automatization of processing of the foreign language so that readers can give less conscious attention to the linguistic surface in constructing meanings more quickly and efficiently. Research indicates that arguments for incidental vocabulary acquisition have probably been overstated, but some gains are measurable (e.g. Pigada and Schmidt, ibid.). A relevant and more recent development in this area is the formation of reading circles both face to face (Shelton-Strong, 2012) and through online communities of readers discussing their reading (Lima, 2013, 2014). I return to such developments in the chapter’s section on recent developments and future directions for literature in ELT.

Literature in the ELT classroom

In this section, I turn more directly to practical issues in using literature in ELT. I have tried to indicate in previous sections some examples of what research findings might mean in practice for teachers and students, but there is never a direct and unarguable line from such applied linguistic research to the classroom. We need to learn from both second language learning research and educational research, including action research projects, which tell us what apparently works and does not work in actual classrooms. Paran (2008) makes a valuable critique of narrowly linguistic approaches to uses of literature in ELT which have neglected practical classroom and educational issues.

Generally, in terms of how and what to teach, which are the key questions for teacher–practitioners, the news is comforting. While training in the use of literature is unfortunately lacking in most ELT teacher education, the good news is that tasks (see Van den Branden, this volume) are a very effective way of engaging with literary texts. Precise principles for designing tasks for literary texts are provided by Duff and Maley (1990/2007), and include use of completion tasks, matching exercises, jigsaw activities and other classic CLT techniques. If literature is still itself found intimidating or unattractive by learners (and teachers!), this is a challenge for teacher trainers to tackle. But if literature, as has been argued, is language-in-use not unlike other uses of language, then, the same basic pedagogical techniques and methods can be used as for any other text, or as in established approaches to the teaching of reading. Stylistics, the linguistically informed systematic and principled study of texts, offers linguistic ways into interactive and exploratory study of a literary text. Related are the ‘transformation’ exercises of (perhaps the best example) Rob Pope (1995). A transformation can take the form of changing a source text into a different genre, for example a description of a landscape in a poem transformed into an estate agent’s ‘blurb’. A scene from a novel or short story can be dramatised, with students asked, for example, to add precise stage directions concerning movements, facial expressions or other details not present in the source text. Any discussion of existing differing translations of a text, or an attempt by students themselves to translate, will immediately raise questions of meaning and intention which can be very engaging.

Similarly, dramatisations (e.g. Elgar, 2002) or other performances, translations to the film medium as well as genre, style, narratology (e.g. Carter and Long, 1987, 1991) and indeed actual
linguistic translations are now recognised to be of real learning value (Cook, 2010). The point to reiterate is that the literary text is a resource to learn from rather than an icon to be taught. Teachers and learners can and should play around with it to discover how it works and how perhaps it may be made to work better for them. The best tasks and activities will exploit to the full the specific features of the text. Literary texts do not only offer topics or themes. They offer valuable uses of language, and this is where its greatest affordances lie for language learners.

But selection of literature is not only a lesson-by-lesson or task-by-task issue; it is also a concern for wider syllabus design. Over 30 years ago, Brumfit (1981) highlighted a tension between increasingly impressive techniques for exploiting literary texts in classrooms and the relative absence of wider curriculum considerations and more longitudinal views beyond the single successful lesson: what texts to read, in what order and why. This observation often still applies today, though perhaps we are increasingly aware of it as ELT is more and more closely integrated into school level teaching. Enthusiasm for the use of literature in class needs to be tempered with wider thinking about the aims of the students and the outcomes looked for, including how learning on the programme will be assessed. Too often the approach to using literature in ELT has been opportunistic and short term rather than strategic, the ‘fun’ or undoubtedly valuable lesson in its own right taking precedence over longer term plans for L2 proficiency development. That said, some interesting literature-in-ELT syllabus documents are at last appearing (e.g. International Baccalaureate [IB] documents, Singapore Ministry of Education), and I note that these wider aims are not only to do with vocabulary building, genre and register learning, or better reading skills alone but part of wider educational aspirations for ethical citizenship and (inter-) cultural awareness. As Tate notes:

I refuse to look at my students as primarily history majors, accounting majors, nursing majors. I much prefer to treat them as people whose most important conversations will take place outside the academy, as they struggle to figure out how to live their lives – that is, how to vote and love and survive, how to respond to change and diversity and death and oppression and freedom.

(1993: 320)

The emergence of Modern Language Association (MLA) guidelines, American Council for Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards (from the USA), the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (see chapter references) and other such documents informing language curriculums, teacher training and materials design demonstrate a growing interest in the role that literature and culture need to play in language education at the highest levels of planning and policy down to ‘the next lesson’.

Further recent developments and future directions

Interest in culture and intercultural communication (see Kramsch and Zhu, this volume) is growing as more and more people come into contact more frequently, not always harmoniously, with those with different beliefs, ways of living, and ideas and aspirations than their own. New curriculum and syllabus statements in Europe and the US recognise the importance of raising cultural awareness and educating cultural intermediaries. This points to a renewed relevance for reading the literatures of other cultures. This is not only a question of, for example, coming to understand factual cultural features like the meaning of ‘semi-detached house’. More importantly, through literature, we can get some idea of what it feels like to be ‘like that’, to do that, to believe that, or to belong to another cultural group. If imposed, such texts will
do more harm than good; the challenge for educators is to foster tolerance rather than confirm prejudices – and this is much easier said than done. Bredella and Delanoy (1996), for example, report well-intentioned uses of cultural materials in Germany that seemed to reinforce rather than challenge negative learner stereotypes. It is also important to emphasise that literature can teach how like each other we often are, as well as sometimes how different. Literature alone cannot be sufficient for such learning but can contribute to it. One specific aspect of this interest in intercultural competence is the renewed interest in translation and own language use by those who will act as mediators in increasingly multicultural and multilingual worlds (Council of Europe, 2001; Cook, 2010; see Kerr, this volume) and a growing recognition of the mix of languages and varieties typical of literary text. Clearly, literary texts, and activities around literary texts, can be relevant to these important new educational imperatives. English, as we all know, is a world language, but by that same token, it is not quite the rather one-dimensional, native-speaker oriented standard language it was once believed to be (see Seargeant, this volume for further discussion).

Similarly, ELT is moving into schools and even early years education (see Enever, this volume), where once its predecessor, ‘TEFL’, was concerned almost exclusively with the teaching of adults. Younger learners are now the focus of a growing field of expertise as their numbers grow, and we see teenagers in secondary schools with ever higher levels of proficiency. Thus, Bland (2013) looks at the use of children’s literature, young adult literature and cross-over literature aimed at both audiences, such as the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling or The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (Mark Haddon, 2003), which all originally had non-ELT audiences. Meanwhile, from nursery rhymes to stories and diaries (or blogs) to picture books and comics, literature seems to be ever more relevant for L2 learners.

A related phenomenon is that of multimodal literary texts and spin offs, also addressed by Bland (2013). Gaming, film and video all contribute to learners’ visual literacy, literary literacy and critical cultural literacy. Adaptations of all kinds, including appropriations into other media and ‘transformations’, whereby a source text which originally inspired creativity is changed into a version no longer obviously or simply related (Sanders, 2015), are now the norm for literary work and are often subsumed into wider discussions of ‘creativity’. As noted earlier in the chapter, reading groups and reading circles have never been more popular, in ELT as in the wider population (Shelton-Strong, 2012; Lima, 2013). Publishers, authors, retailers, newspapers and other media all encourage and support this burgeoning activity. Online reading groups have emerged (Lima, 2014), and the transnational possibilities of the Internet do seem to have some traction here as a complement to, surely, rather than ever replacing, the pleasure of the face-to-face meeting of those whose relations have developed partly or wholly through their reading group.

I close with creative writing and drama performance. One of the more welcome developments in literature study in L1 contexts, and now in ELT, is the rapid growth and popularity of literature as ‘doing’, something to try for yourself, as well as something to study in the work of expert published writers. Hanauer (2010, 2012) reported his development of ELT creative writing principles, and Spiro (2007), Iida (2012) and others (see, for instance, Disney, 2014) have provided many other examples of and justifications for such work. What was a rather marginal set of activities ten or twenty years ago is now unarguably a central use of literature in ELT.

**Conclusion**

What we call literature and how we teach it will undoubtedly go on changing, just as literature itself weaves in and out of fashion in ELT and elsewhere. Perhaps the fundamental
guarantee of its continuing relevance and presence in whatever forms its study and reading may take in the future is that it is a most meaningful human activity and, as long as it is considered critically, one that can benefit all involved in learning, and L2 learning, as few other activities can.

Discussion questions

- Literatures in English are being produced and (re-)discovered from across the world with the ongoing globalisation of English. What opportunities and challenges does the use of literatures in English from Africa, Asia and others bring to ELT education?
- How can literary texts be used, adapted and developed best in the light of contemporary research in second language learning that points to the importance of play and creativity for learners?
- Few teacher training programmes have time for sessions on the use of literature, and many teachers are not themselves readers of literature. If claims for the value of literature in ELT made in this chapter are largely accepted, is this lack of specific training a problem? Or can the trained teacher simply be trusted to transfer techniques and principles learned elsewhere to the use of literature?

Related topics

Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Educational perspectives on ELT; Language and culture in ELT; Language curriculum design; Learner autonomy; Method, methods and methodology; Motivation; Questioning ‘English-only’ classrooms; Sociocultural theory and the language classroom; Teaching literacy; Task-based language teaching; World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca.

Further reading


Hall, G. (2015) Literature in language education. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (This thoroughly revised and updated second edition develops themes outlined in this chapter and also includes ideas and guidance for research projects in the area.)


References

Using literature in ELT


