Literature and language teaching

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Historical background and definitions

Using literary texts in the classroom exposes language learners to creative uses of language and generates creative responses, and has been a fundamental part of language teaching for centuries. Literary texts have been considered to stimulate language acquisition, expose students to the culture of the target language, and engage the learner cognitively and emotionally. Literary texts have also been characterised as embodying stylistic and rhetorical devices that convey the highest aesthetic values, as well as providing an illustration of grammar rules to learners. Even Henry Sweet, described as the a ‘prime originator of an applied linguistics approach to the teaching of languages’ (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004: 199), included the teaching of literature as the penultimate stage in the graded curriculum proposed in his book *The Practical Study of Languages*, published in 1899. It was generally held that more advanced learners would refine their knowledge of language through exposure to a canon of great writers, judged according to the ‘endurably serious nature of their examination of the human condition’ (Carter, 2007: 5). This meant that literature was inevitably defined as classic novels, poetry, and plays, written by a highly selective number of writers, and deemed by teachers, exam boards, publishers, and critics to convey superior aesthetic and imaginative use of language, which could serve as an exemplar for learners (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000).

As English language teaching oriented itself to more instrumental and functional approaches, from the 1960s onwards, the focus shifted towards exposing learners to language as used in everyday interactions or to the specific language required for specialist discourse communities such as English for academic purposes (EAP) or English for specific purposes (ESP). However, a number of researchers point out that there were many parts of the world in which literary texts – meaning classic texts from the canon – still continued to form part of the curriculum (Gilroy & Parkinson, 1996; Paran, 2006), even though this was not reflected in academic publications. By the mid-1980s, there was renewed interest in the use of literary texts in language teaching, as illustrated in a number of publications (see, for example, Maley & Moulding, 1985; McRae & Boardman, 1984). As will be seen in this chapter, this interest led to a questioning of many of the assumptions about the role of literary texts in language teaching, and some debate about how to define precisely what is meant by ‘literature’. One response to this debate was to differentiate between an ontological approach and a functional approach (Ellis, 1974, cited in Parkinson & Reid-Thomas, 2000: 22). Rather than seeking to define literature as something within itself (*ontological*), a *functional* approach focuses on what something does or what we do with it. Thus the definition of the term ‘literature’ could
be broadened to include literature with a small ‘l’ or ‘any text whose imaginative content will stimulate reaction and response in the receiver’ (McRae, 1991: vii). Of course, such a definition may be problematic in that it poses the questions of whether to exclude texts such as journalism, non-fiction essays, or oral fables, for example, as well as whether judgements about the quality of a text should be taken into account. Nevertheless, a functional definition of the term ‘literature’ does enable us to recognise that definitions of literature are themselves developed in different social, cultural, and historical contexts. Thus any recent definition of literature within the field of language teaching is inextricably linked to the theoretical and pedagogic contexts in which it is explored by both teachers and academics. In the last decade, this definition has grown out of McRae’s ‘literature with a small l’ to incorporate a widening range of genres, including children’s literature, fairy tales, popular fiction, and even autobiographical narratives (Paran, 2006).

Critical issues

Reasons for using literature

A number of reasons have been put forward for using literary texts with the language learner. One of these – which has a lengthy pedigree, as we have seen – is that literary texts expose learners to the finest examples of ‘good grammar’ and vocabulary, thus providing a model of ‘correct’ language. However, it is tricky to sustain this view, since there is considerable debate about whether or not literary texts can provide learners with a model of ‘correct’ language. Another frequently mentioned reason for using literary texts with the language learner is that literary texts serve a wider educational function, broadening out the curriculum to promote personal growth, self-awareness, and critical thinking. This does provide a compelling argument for language teachers to be more than simply ‘technicians’, fostering the mechanical acquisition of functional uses of language. Nevertheless, it has been criticised as rather vague, since different types of non-literary texts could also serve the same educational functions. Thus proponents of literature in language teaching have attempted to advance more precise reasons for using literary texts.

One such reason is that literary texts are authentic pieces of discourse. With the advent of communicative language teaching, the use of authentic texts, having a real social purpose for the native speaker, has taken precedence over the use of texts artificially manufactured by textbook writers to illustrate a particular grammatical or lexical point. Unabridged literary texts are thus seen to ‘offer genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers and text-types at many levels of difficulty’ (Duff & Maley, 1990: 6).

Linked to this notion of authenticity is that of motivation: it is argued that exposure to authentic literary texts is highly motivating for many learners (Duff & Maley, 1990; Lazar, 1993). Literary texts are seen as stimulating deep personal involvement by providing learners with engaging, non-trivial content including the complex depiction of human emotions and dilemmas, as well as the aesthetic pleasures of language. Naturally, the choice of text is important here, since certain texts may prove to be more engaging for a particular group of learners than for another.

A third reason for using literary texts with language learners is because they expose students to a different culture. Clearly, a literary text cannot simply be seen as a documentary rendering from which students can mine factual information about a particular culture. This is because writers’ portrayals of their own cultures may be idiosyncratic, rather than naturalistic, or because the reader’s own closeness or distance from the culture in question may determine
his or her interpretation of the text. Nevertheless, Kramsch (1993: 175) argues that, by studying a particular text, ‘students are given access to a world of attitudes and values, collective imaginings and historical frames of reference that constitute the memory of a people or a speech community’. However, Kramsch does not conceptualise this access to culture as enabling students to extract data about the other culture, but rather as facilitating a critical reflection on both the native and the target cultures, in which learners actively construct meaning for themselves and begin to create a ‘third place’ for themselves beyond the confines of a monolithic notion of culture or identity.

This active construction of meaning is one of the key reasons advanced for using literature with language learners. According to Widdowson (1983, cited in Brumfit & Carter, 1986: 14), ‘procedures for making sense are much more in evidence in literary texts’. This is because literary discourse is representational, rather than referential (Widdowson, 1984). It does not refer directly to an immediate social context, but rather to the internal fictional world that it creates. The reader has to actively engage with the text in order to infer the complex meanings that lead to an interpretation, because meanings cannot simply be extracted by reference to the real world. Thus using literary texts in the classroom aids the acquisition of ‘sense-making procedures’, since highlighting interpretive procedures while reading literary texts develops a learner’s ability to infer meaning in other contexts – a vital skill for the language learner. In addition, because literary texts are open to multiple interpretations, they are an excellent resource in communicative classrooms, which aim to provide real reasons for learners to interact with each other.

In order to justify a particular interpretation of a text, readers are forced to consider the language in the text, and its specific meanings and effects. This heightened emphasis on language increases the learner’s sensitivity to specific uses of language, such as how a grammatical structure has been used to convey a particular meaning, or how the connotation of a particular word is activated by the surrounding discourse. Thus literary texts are seen as a useful resource for increasing students’ overall language awareness and understanding of discourse.

These reasons have, however, been dismissed by Edmondson (1997), who argues that no valid claims can be made regarding the special status of literature, since, at the time of his writing, there were no empirical studies verifying its psycholinguistic efficacy in promoting language learning. Further, Edmondson argues that other types of text are equally as authentic, as motivating, or as helpful in promoting cultural understanding. Edmondson’s position has, in turn, been criticised as taking a narrow view of language learning as largely utilitarian and failing to account for more holistic perspectives in which students’ affective needs, for example, are considered (Paran, 2008). It could also be argued that the aesthetic pleasure and ‘mysteries of experience’ (Widdowson, 1992: 181) that learners sense in literary texts cannot easily be replicated by using other types of text in the classroom.

The nature of literary language

One issue to consider relating to the use of literary texts with language learners is the nature of literary language and whether, and to what extent, it differs from other uses of language. Such an issue is important for language teachers, since if one of the aims of language teaching is to provide learners with ‘correct’ pedagogic models of language to emulate, can literary texts be described as good models of correct language?

According to formalist literary critics, such as Roman Jakobson, literary texts, particularly poetry, are characterised by a highly self-conscious use of language that draws attention to
itself through, for example, unusual word order (‘deviance’), extensive use of metaphor, and deliberate patterning, seen in devices such as alliteration, assonance, rhyming, and other repetitions. In this way, literary language ‘defamiliarises’ reality, by making the everyday seem strange through the use of linguistic deviations from the norm. Widdowson’s (1975) pioneering work *Stylistics and Language Teaching* explores the notion of ‘deviation’ by considering some of the ways in which particular grammatical rules are broken in selected literary texts. Nevertheless, Widdowson (1975: 37) also makes the point that there is a considerable body of literature that does not show any ‘marked linguistic oddity’ and which cannot be defined in any satisfactory way in terms of textual deviation.

This key point is developed further by other theorists. Brumfit and Carter (1986: 6) argue, for example, that it is ‘impossible to isolate any single or special property of language which is exclusive to a literary work’. This means that many of the features of literary language (such as the creative construction of neologisms, playing on the double or multiple meanings of words, mixing of styles, etc.) can also be found in other forms of discourse as well. This has been borne out by corpus studies, which reveal that many creative uses of language are also present in everyday speech and casual conversation, leading to Carter’s (2004: 215) observation that ‘[c]reative language is not a capacity of special people but a special capacity of all people’.

It is also impossible, in purely linguistic terms, to describe literary language itself as a specific variety or register, such as the language of law or medicine. In fact, literary texts seem to be the one form of discourse in which different varieties of language (for example dialects, spoken or written forms, formal and informal language, etc.) can all be mixed in new and inventive ways (Hall, 2005). Nevertheless, it is clear that certain creative uses of language are more pervasive in literary texts, suggesting that different types of text can be placed along a cline or gradient according to the extent of their literariness.

This notion of a continuum in linguistic terms between literary and non-literary language has important implications for classroom practitioners. First, instead of regarding a poet’s unusual language as deliberate and intentional, while a language learner’s errors are seen as deficient and requiring correction, both the poet and the language learner can be seen as engaging creatively with the expressive resources of language. From the point of view of the language learner, this chimes with the emphasis on fluency in communicative language teaching, by valuing and encouraging the creative capacity of the learner. Secondly, the concept of the continuum suggests that an important way of exploring literary texts is by studying them alongside non-literary texts in order to identify key continuities and differences between them. A third implication is that practitioners may want to broaden out the idea of ‘correctness’. Thus, instead of teachers asking learners to pinpoint ‘wrong’ or ‘deviant’ uses of language in literary texts, Parkinson and Reid-Thomas (2000: 71) suggest that students are asked to respond in a ‘more open and plural’ manner. For example, when engaging in paraphrasing activities designed to encourage basic comprehension, they could be asked to suggest similar phrases to those in the literary text which might be more normal or standard in the kind of English that the student is learning, thus acknowledging that norms of correctness may vary in different speech communities.

**The role of the reader**

When considering the use of literary texts in the classroom, practitioners need to consider not only the nature of the language being studied, but also the creative role of the reader in
interpreting it. Thus reading can be seen as a transaction between the reader and the text, in which the reader draws on his or her personal experiences, values, and beliefs to interact with the text and make sense of it (Rosenblatt, 1978). Reader-response theories arising from literary criticism are relevant here, and have had an influence on possible classroom approaches and activities.

Reader-response theory puts the reader at the very centre of the relationship between author, text, and reader. Thus reader-response critics focus less on the text or the author’s intentions within the text, and more on how the reader actively engages with text in order to make interpretations. According to Hirvela (1996: 128–9), there is a continuum of views concerning the balance between the reader and text, with some critics (such as Iser, 1972, and Rosenblatt, 1978, cited in Hirvela, 1996) regarding the reader and text as having roughly the same importance, while other critics (including Fish, 1982, cited in Hirvela, 1996) ‘assign sole interpretative authority to the reader’. For Fish, literary texts do not intrinsically themselves possess meaning; rather, that meaning is conferred on the text by the reader. As Parkinson and Reid-Thomas (2000: 8) point out, this would seem to be a ‘recipe for interpretative anarchy’, or the attitude that any interpretation, however far-fetched, is valid. Fish, however, does place limits on this by suggesting the notion of an ‘interpretive community’, which, according to Parkinson and Reid-Thomas, Fish construes as the academic community. But this notion could be widened to include any group of readers who do not necessarily share a particular interpretation of a text, but who do share some conventions for understanding and making sense of a text. From the point of view of language teachers, this raises the questions of what these conventions might be and how they relate to the concept of literary competence, how such conventions might vary cross-culturally, and whether it is part of the language teacher’s role to ‘socialise’ students into using these conventions. Such questions may be particularly pressing in contexts in which students have to take exams in which only some interpretations are regarded as valid responses to specific literary texts.

The significance of the role of the reader in making sense of text has impacted on classroom methodology and task design. Thus it has been suggested that diaries or personal response journals are useful tools for developing the reader’s personal response to a text. For example, students can write repeated reflections about a literary work in a reading diary: initially after reading, then after sharing responses with others, and finally by writing a full-scale response (Ali, 1993). Alternatively, students’ personal response journals can be used to help them to ‘develop and refine their responses’ (Liaw, 2001: 38). The ultimate aim of such diaries or journals is to enable students to become more sensitive readers, but the starting point is the students’ personal involvement with the text and their response to it. However, Hirvela (1996) has argued that personal-response approaches to using literature, while motivating for students and leading to the production of original discourse, are still generally reactive and privilege the text, rather than the reader. Hirvela proposes instead that classroom methodology and materials should draw on Culler’s (1982: 35) notion that a reader’s response to a text tells ‘a story of reading’, in which the text is recreated during the reader’s process of reading and an interpretation of a work becomes an account of how the reader makes sense of it. The emphasis is therefore on the readers’ exploration of their own process of reading and how it facilitates interpretation, rather than on producing a personal response after extracting meaning from the text. Nevertheless, while such activities may indeed encourage learners to become more aware of the process that they undergo in order to reach an interpretation, there is perhaps the danger that students’ recording of this may be rather general, because such an approach to reading could be applied to any type of text. This suggests that classroom activities may
need to prime students to focus on some of the more ‘literary’ aspects of the text, so that these can then feed into their accounts of their reading.

**Different approaches/methodologies**

Historically, the methodology adopted for using literary texts in English language teaching reflected the central tenets of grammar translation, with common activities including teacher-directed analysis of literary passages or translations of particular texts. Texts were often seen as providing access to a particular culture, and the role of the teacher was to provide learners with information regarding the historical, political, and cultural background to the text. This emphasis on culture has led Carter and Long (1991: 8) to identify a cultural model for teaching literature in which the text is regarded largely as an object for study ‘about which students learn to acquire information’. However, with the influence of communicative language teaching (CLT), more process-oriented, student-centred approaches have come to the fore. Thus Carter and Long also identify a language model and a personal growth model. The former is seen as providing a systematic set of procedures for students to access literary texts, while the latter encourages student to link the text to their own experiences, in order to express their feelings and opinions. In practice, however, as we shall see, there is often an overlap between these different approaches.

The cultural model suggests that the literary text is a cultural artefact, which can be understood by using traditional procedures for teaching literature, such as identifying particular literary devices or providing learners with the characteristics of literary movements. With the advent of CLT, however, Carter (1996) identifies a move away from teaching literature per se towards exploring the interface between language and literature. This integration can itself be seen along a continuum on which, at one end, there is a strong literary focus, while at the other, literature is used simply as text without focusing on ‘literary values, literary knowledge or literary skills’ (Paran, 2008: 467). Where exactly teachers position themselves along this continuum depends on the context in which they are teaching, why their students are learning English, and which external constraints (such as curricula and assessments) impact on classroom practice.

We can begin at one end of the continuum, where literary texts are simply seen as a resource for generating stimulating language activities and developing personal response. According to Duff and Maley (1990: 5), the aim is to ‘cut away the dead weights of critical commentary, method and explanation’, and to engage students interactively with texts, their fellow students, and the teacher. In this approach, the text itself is of primary importance, and students do not passively absorb an authorised interpretation of the text, but actively construct it themselves by engaging in various tasks or activities. Many of the techniques used in CLT are thus used with literary texts, including those involving cloze and gap fill, prediction and ranking, information gap, and sentence and paragraph reordering. Such activities are seen in a number of resource books for teachers (for example Bassnet & Grundy, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1987) and books for students (for example Collie & Slater, 1993; Lazar, 1999). Duff and Maley (1990) provide a useful toolkit of generative procedures that can be applied to literary (and non-literary) texts as a way of developing language activities for the classroom.

This approach has a number of advantages for classroom practitioners. First, by applying typical CLT procedures to literary texts, teachers lacking in literary knowledge may develop the confidence to explore literary texts with their students. Secondly, this approach recognises that literary texts provide an excellent authentic resource that enables the exploration
of more absorbing themes than the somewhat superficial topics often found in textbooks. Thirdly, this approach is language-focused in that ‘students are obliged to pay careful attention to the text itself and to generate language in the process of completing the task’ (Duff & Maley, 1990: 5). Finally, this approach can be of real benefit to elementary and intermediate-level language learners, because it enables the use of linguistically more accessible texts that do not have to have canonical status. However, it could be argued that such an open approach to the choice of texts does not necessarily enable either teachers or students to discriminate in terms of quality of text, thereby forgoing any evaluation of their literary excellence. As a corrective to this, Parkinson and Reid-Thomas (2000) suggest that any rewritings that students make of a text should always be considered alongside the original. A further critique of this approach is that it does not focus on any distinctively literary characteristics of a text in any targeted way.

One language-based approach that can be used to draw attention to the distinctive literary characteristics of a text is that of stylistics. The use of stylistics, which draws on linguistic analysis in order to reach an interpretation of a literary text, has been somewhat controversial in second-language teaching. In general, stylistics aims to identify key linguistic features of a text (often those that are deviant, foregrounded, or patterned in some way) and analyse them in detail, so as to facilitate interpretation. As such, it is useful for language learners, helping them to notice significant features of a text and to consider the meanings that they transmit. Thus teachers might undertake their own analysis of the text and then develop a series of questions or activities that alert students to these features, enabling them to consider these features in reaching an interpretation of the text.

Proponents of stylistics argue that while native speakers may have intuitions about textual meaning that enable them to formulate interpretations, learners of English may lack these intuitions, since their grasp of the norms of use for grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and discourse in the second language is still developing. Asking learners simply to respond to texts may elicit no response whatsoever, unless some form of scaffolding is provided. Stylistics can serve this purpose by providing a set of transparent procedures for analysing texts, which can empower both teachers and learners, and develop their confidence in making interpretations (Parkinson & Reid-Thomas, 2000; Widdowson, 1975).

However, stylistics has not been without its critics, particularly Gower (1986), who considers it to be a sterile and dull procedure that bypasses the affective and cognitive responses of the reader/student. Gower asserts that stylistics replaces the process of reading and the attendant involvement of the reader with a rather mechanical analysis of ‘objective’ linguistic facts in a text. Another criticism of stylistics is that it focuses too narrowly on the actual texts themselves, rather than on how students make sense of them (Paran, 2008). Its occasional overuse of technical linguistic terms can also make it seem remote from the everyday concerns of classroom teachers.

Some of these criticisms, however, can be countered by using classroom tasks that are pitched at the right level for the students, and which engage them in discovery-based group or pair interactions (Durant, 1996; Rosenkjær, 2006). Stylistic analysis can be enhanced by providing learners with pre-tasks that engage students both emotionally and cognitively with the themes of a text (Rosenkjær, 2006). Stylistics can also be complemented by providing contextual information relating to the biography of the author (Durant, 1996), the genre of a text, and its historical context. Such information can be provided once students have attempted to reach their own interpretation of the text, and their interpretations can then be reconsidered in light of this information. This means that a plurality of interpretations can be encouraged in the classroom, but, as Rosenkjær (2006) argues, such interpretations will
be logically argued and consistent with the evidence in the text. Such interpretations can also be reached by asking students to test out their intuitions about language by comparing particular usages in a literary text with those in a large corpus (Louw, 1997), thus integrating corpus-based linguistic research into stylistic methods.

Stylistics is a method that draws on linguistic concepts, and the influence of linguistics can also be seen in approaches that are sensitive to the notion of literary genres and use theoretical concepts from linguistics to inform classroom methodology. Thus the distinctive features of different literary genres can be identified in order to suggest appropriate classroom methodology and activities (Lazar, 1990, 1993; Parkinson & Reid-Thomas, 2000). For example, with regards to the teaching of short stories, Parkinson and Reid-Thomas (2000) draw on elements of both structuralist narratology and sociolinguistic analysis of oral narratives. This enables them to provide a checklist of features of narrative to take into account when planning classroom work. Parkinson and Reid-Thomas (2000: 54) explicitly state that they are interested in teaching, and therefore use ‘simple and partial versions of some theoretical concepts’ to inform their suggestions for classroom practice. Nevertheless, their approach not only provides suitable scaffolding for learners and teachers, but also combines careful attention to the generic features of text with the possibility of genuine personal response. This suggests that teachers can benefit by using theoretical concepts to inform and inspire task design.

As we have seen, language-based approaches range from those using literary texts as a resource to those drawing on stylistics or linguistic concepts linked to different genres. Nevertheless, a significant criticism of such approaches is that they can become rather reductive and ahistorical if they rely only on a process orientation that privileges student responses. Carter (1996), for example, has argued that it is often necessary to provide social, historical, or biographical information in order to arrive at a viable understanding of a text. This may be particularly true if students are being asked to make sense of texts from earlier periods in history or from a culture radically different from their own. Lazar (1993) raises the issue of whether, and to what extent, background cultural information to a text provided by teachers may alter, and indeed deepen, students’ interpretation of a text. Students can be asked, for example, to engage in an interpretation of a poem, such as Robert Browning’s ‘Andrea Del Sarto’ (1855), both before and after receiving information about its protagonist (a real historical figure), as well as the genre of dramatic monologues. The aim of such activities is to enable learners to reflect on how interpretations can be informed by background literary, cultural, or historical knowledge. Thus, when developing appropriate classroom methodology, we need to ‘look both ways before crossing’ (Carter, 1996) in terms of both language and literary development. Moreover, we also need to ensure that students engage emotionally and cognitively with literature in order to develop a personal response that will enable them to critically evaluate the text.

**Current research**

The focus has recently switched to the need for more data-driven, empirical research into the use of literature in language teaching. Two issues need to be considered: first, why research is required; and secondly, what is admissible as research and what it might include. Paran (2008: 470) makes a strong case for more research by pointing out that both supporters and opponents of language education agree that there is a ‘paucity of empirical evidence’ for the claims regarding the use of literature in language learning programmes. Paran argues that the aims of research should be to validate the largely theoretical writing
on the topic, while Hall (2005: 181) points out that there are ‘unresolved questions still insufficiently investigated’. Some of these questions might focus on how learners make sense of literary texts, learners’ and teachers’ attitudes to using literary texts in language courses, and what kinds of curricula, methodologies and tasks incorporating literary texts demonstrably improve language acquisition.

A variety of research methods have been used to begin to investigate these questions, including analysis of student discourse when discussing literary texts. One key study by Hanauer (2001), for example, used an in-depth analysis of the transcribed discussions of pairs of Israeli college students, in order to investigate how learners read and understand poetry, and whether or not studying poetry enhances linguistic and cultural knowledge. The students were asked to read and discuss in pairs Leonard Cohen’s poem ‘Suzanne’ (1966), with the aim of understanding it. Discussions between each pair were recorded, and the protocols of the participants were transcribed, coded, and analysed according to nine categories, which included such functions as ‘noticing’, ‘questioning’, ‘making interpretive hypotheses’, and ‘presenting world knowledge’. According to Hanauer, while eight out of the nine categories were associated with meaning construction, the two most prevalent were those of noticing, which involved participants directing attention at a specific aspect of the text, and interpretive hypotheses, which involved participants proposing a new option for understanding a specific linguistic element or questions raised in the poem. Thus Hanauer suggests that readers direct attention towards the formal language structures of the poem and use these to construct meaning, supporting the position that poetry can be used to enhance linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target language.

Another study, by Kim (2004), analysed student interactions during discussions in student-led literature circles in order to explore whether literature enhances linguistic and cultural knowledge. Kim’s methods included participant observation of lessons, recording and analysing discussions, field notes, and follow-up informal interviews with participants. Her qualitative analysis of the classroom discourse recorded provides evidence that literature discussions have the potential to develop communicative competency by involving students both emotionally and intellectually, and increasing their enjoyment of reading.

In contrast to these studies, rather different research methods were used by Yang (2001), who undertook a statistical analysis of multiple-choice tests for two separate groups of students, designed to assess their knowledge of English grammar, sentence structure, and usage both before and after a language course. One group of students followed a general English curriculum, while the others were obliged to read an Agatha Christie mystery novel, which was then discussed for an hour each week in class. The findings indicate a ‘substantial advantage for the novel-reading classes’ (Yang, 2001: 457) in terms of their mean test scores. This research was triangulated with statistical analysis of student questionnaires, as well as in-depth interviews with twenty-four students, in which it was confirmed that students felt positive about the learning afforded by reading an authentic text.

These studies all use a variety of methods, some of which may be relevant largely to professional researchers with access to relatively sophisticated resources. However, the need for practitioner-based research, undertaken as a form of action research (Hall, 2005) or as case studies (Paran, 2006), in real classrooms by teachers, has also been highlighted. Paran (2008: 470) points out that, because the classification of what constitutes research is variable and potentially circumscribed, it is important to validate the ‘testimony of a practitioner reflecting on what they do in class’. Such practitioner-based approaches may also pave the way for more studies to be undertaken in primary and secondary classrooms, rather than largely in universities, as happens currently.
An emphasis on practitioner-based research means that qualitative research methods will tend to be favoured over quantitative methods. The advantage of qualitative research is that it enables the exploration of ‘nuances and detail of particular individual cases and situations’ (Hall, 2005: 183), often in naturalistic classroom settings. For practitioners, such research is frequently easier and more practical to carry out, especially since it is often generated from a practical classroom problem that requires further investigation. Hall provides a list of methods for data collection in addition to those mentioned already, including think-aloud protocols (TAPs) or ‘free writing’, diaries and journals, observation, and field notes. He also makes recommendations for enhancing practitioners’ own research, including how to formulate a research question and select appropriate research methods, and makes suggestions regarding projects for further investigation. If these are taken up, they will undoubtedly lead to the further development of data-driven investigation of using literature in language teaching.

Validating theory through empirical data provides strong support for the use of literary texts in the classroom. Nevertheless, it is precisely some of the qualities of literary texts – their playfulness, sense of an alternative reality, appeal to the imagination, pleasure in the aesthetic – that may most engage our learners, but which perhaps cannot always be captured in empirical studies. Thus it could be argued that insisting only on data-driven research to endorse the use of literature in the classroom could limit classroom practice to achieving overly functionalist aims.

**Recommendations for practice**

When considering classroom practice, teachers need to consider a number of factors, including the students themselves, the texts selected, appropriate methodology and the concomitant activities or tasks devised, and the role of the teacher. The starting point for any teaching should naturally be the students, and a consideration of their linguistic and educational needs, their age and cultural backgrounds, their interests, and their purposes in learning English. Prioritising the learners will enable teachers to make informed decisions about the selection of an appropriate text, if indeed the teacher is able to do so and this has not already been prescribed by a syllabus. The key considerations are whether or not the text is likely to engage and interest the students, and whether it is written at an appropriate linguistic level to challenge students, rather than demotivate them. The aims of using a literary text should also be considered: if is to encourage very close attention to language, then poetry may be a good choice, whereas if it is to provide students with as much extensive reading practice as possible, then novels, including popular forms such as thrillers, might be a better choice.

Once the text has been selected, the teacher needs to consider what type of methodology to adopt in the classroom. As we have seen, a variety of different approaches are possible, ranging from using the text as a resource to stimulate personal response, to focusing in detail on its linguistic features through stylistics or on its more literary features by providing key background information. Here, it is important to bear in mind that, paradoxically, creativity of response is best stimulated by ensuring that there are certain constraints (Tin, 2011; see also Tin, Chapter 27). Whatever methodology, or combination of methodologies, is chosen, it is important to provide students with some form of scaffolding, either in terms of sequenced tasks or by means of skilled teacher intervention in the form of appropriate questioning.

Sequenced tasks, informed by five key principles, might help learners to find meaningful points of entry into the literary text. The aim behind the principles is not to insist on a
particular interpretation or response to the text, but rather to provide students with sufficient scaffolding to make a well-justified and confident interpretation themselves. Task design should be underscored by a progression of tasks from easier to more complex. Easier tasks might include those relating to the more referential content in the text, while more complex ones might be connected to teasing out the representational meanings implicit in the text.

The first principle to consider is that of relevance: how can the text be made relevant to the students’ own experience? Can task design incorporate certain aspects of students’ schematic knowledge, either as a point of entry into the text or as a point of comparison? For example, students might be asked to free-associate around some of the key themes in a literary text before being asked to read it themselves. On the other hand, it could be argued that one of the pleasures of reading literary texts is precisely that they take us beyond the limits of our own experience – thus insisting on too narrow a definition of relevance could be counter-productive.

The second principle relates to cultural background: will students need some cultural background information to make sense of the text, and if so, what? Can a contrast be made explicitly between the students’ culture and that in the text? Can the activities relating to the text encourage students to develop a ‘third space’ (Kramsch, 1993)?

A third consideration is the language principle: to what extent may the language in the text be seen as unusual (‘deviating from the norm’) or highly patterned in some way, and what kinds of tasks can be used in order to help students to notice this language? A simple example might be a poem in which new metaphors are created by breaking collocational restrictions. Students might first be asked to consider what the usual collocations might be, and then to comment on the meanings created by violating these restrictions.

A fourth consideration is that of literary background, and how necessary or important this might be for students: do the students already have the kind of literary competence to identify the more literary features of a text, such as its genre (e.g. sonnet, thriller, extract from an absurdist play) or its formal features (e.g. alliteration, rhyme, metaphor)? How important is it for them to do so, and what kinds of tasks might be devised to assist with this?

Finally, if sufficient attention is paid to these principles, then it should be easier to focus on the interpretation principle, which encapsulates the idea that students may need some support in arriving at an interpretation of the text. This is particularly the case for elementary and intermediate-level learners, who may be cognitively capable of making an interpretation of the text, but may lack the full linguistic capacity to do so. Different tasks could be devised to help them, including writing short titles summarising the key theme or ‘message’ of a text, or choosing between alternative written interpretations provided by the teacher. It is also important to build in the opportunity for some personal response to the text.

Teachers may decide not to provide any specific tasks in a lesson, but to adopt a more student-led approach in which students, for example, discuss a text in literature circles/reading groups and record their responses in reading journals. If more open-ended class discussions do take place, then the teacher has an important role in orchestrating opportunities for student talk. An interesting study by Boyd and Maloof (2000) suggests that if teachers play the role of ‘questioner, affirmer and clarifier’, they may significantly encourage students’ active participation in a literature lesson, by validating different interpretations and enabling students to make links between the text and their own experience.

Research into creativity suggests that social networks and flat hierarchies – including a good mix of people who know each other well, along with some ‘outsiders’ – make for greater levels of creative teamwork (Lehrer, 2012). Thus active participation may also be fostered by organising pairs and groups so as to include a mix of different students. There
may also be scope for ‘small group multi-tasking’ (Baurain, 2007) in lessons, in which students in large classes all work on different tasks, drawn from a stable framework, which are rotated throughout the course.

**Future directions**

It is not easy to predict future directions in the uses of literature in language teaching, but a number of trends are emerging. These are strongly influenced by globalisation, the rapid increase in Internet technology, the influence of positivist, empirical paradigms in the field of English language teaching, and the engaging possibilities offered by creative writing.

Globalisation has meant that English is now a global language, with the divisions between Kachru’s inner and outer circles at times becoming more flexible. Nativised varieties of English have legitimacy in many part of the world and are being used by many writers as a way of exploring complex local identities. According to Talib (1992), literary texts written in a variety of English with which students can empathise are more likely to promote the integrative goal in language teaching, because such texts enhance students’ sociocultural awareness and sense of identity. Talib argues that using a short story called ‘The Taximan’s Story’ by Catherine Lim (1978), a Singaporean writer, which is written in an approximation of Singaporean colloquial English (SCE), affords many opportunities for developing sociocultural language awareness among learners. For example, learners might be asked to discuss certain linguistic forms in the text in terms of the extent to which they are an accurate representation of SCE or depart from more standard forms. Vethamani (1996) endorses this use of ‘new literatures in English’ by providing a set of language-based activities and stylistic analysis for texts from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, although interestingly the texts to which he refers appear to be written largely in standard English. This suggests that there is a continuum of post-colonial texts that teachers can use, ranging from those written in standard English to those written in nativised varieties. There is also a possible development in terms of increasingly bilingual populations of readers globally who are able to enjoy texts that incorporate code switching, such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz (2007), written in a ‘sort of streetwise brand of Spanglish’ (Kakutani, 2007). Such novels are published in both languages (in this case, English and Spanish), and so there may be an opportunity to develop classroom activities in which more advanced students are encouraged to comment on the quality of a translation, or perhaps write their own translation before comparing it with a published translation.

The Internet will certainly continue to have a profound effect on the use of literature in language teaching. First, it affords many opportunities for project work in which students investigate the background to a literary work. In addition, students can be tasked with creating hyperlinks to a literary work as a form of textual intervention, or with creating their own piece of writing through participation in fan fiction websites (Lazar, 2008). The many different tools offered by computers, such as corpus analysis, word processing, email, and the exchange of audio recordings, can all be harnessed to generate highly interactive dialogue about literary texts between learners of English in one country and, for example, native speakers in another (Meskill & Ranglova, 2000). A number of writers have already explored the use of films and videos of literary texts in the classroom (see Delanoy, 1996; Yeh, 2005), but it may be the case that, in the future, the division between text-as-words and text-as-images is increasingly blurred with the development of multimodal texts online, which include text, images, sound, and hyperlinks (see Gibbons, Chapter 18; Simanowski, Chapter 24). A generation of digital natives may have no trouble consuming and enjoying
such texts, but the challenge for teachers will be how to develop appropriate methodologies for ‘reading’ such texts, so that students are encouraged to be critical and self-reflective in their reading.

As we have seen, there is likely to be more data-driven research into the use of literary texts in language teaching, which might challenge some of the assumptions of theory in this area. Paran (2008) has argued that the contexts for using literature will be extended, with literary texts being used in both EAP and ESP settings, and that the different genres being taught will also be extended, with the inclusion of more non-canonical works, young adult literature, and children’s literature, including picture books. Empirical investigation of the efficacy of such an expansion will also need to be carried out, with further refinement in research methods.

While data-driven research is likely to increase, so too is the trend towards highly participatory creative writing activities, some of which stem from the drive to study a text more closely. Pope (1995: 1) advocates the use of textual interventions in the classroom, whereby students make changes in the text from ‘the merest nuance of punctuation or intonation to total recasting in terms of genre, time, place, participants and medium’. By intervening in the text, and actively changing it, students come to understand it more deeply, both linguistically and ideologically. For Pope, the starting point is the original text itself, while for Spiro (2004, 2006), either a text or a carefully scaffolded activity stimulates the student to write creatively and use language imaginatively. Such output can be published, for example in school magazines or on the Internet, so that learners of English may increasingly become creative producers of English with a real audience, beyond the confines of the traditional classroom.

Related topics
creativity in second-language learning; literariness; literary stylistics and creativity; literature and multimodality; teaching creative writing

Further reading
A collection exploring both practical and theoretical issues relating to the interface between language and literature in the second-language learning classroom.

A practical resource book for teachers, which includes a range of activities, drawing on communicative methodology.

A thorough account of relevant literary theory, an overview of current research, and a guide to appropriate research topics and methods.

A collection of practitioners’ case studies from around the world, focusing on a range of genres and approaches.

A comprehensive overview of key issues and theory, with practical classroom suggestions for different literary genres.
References


