Towards the Integration of Literature in Second Language Learning

**Autor:** Ruiz Fuentes, Marina (Graduada en Estudios Ingleses).
**Público:** Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. **Materia:** Inglés y Literatura.

**Title:** Towards the Integration of Literature in Second Language Learning

**Abstract**
A growing number of researchers considers that literature should be included in the teaching process of a second language, since it facilitates students’ learning in different fields. For instance, it is not only useful in the linguistic field, but also in the cultural one. However, it has traditionally been disregarded in the second language syllabus design. The aim of this article is to offer an account of the benefits that literature may bring to the learning process, taking into consideration different studies on this issue.

**Keywords:** literature, second language, literary language, everyday language, linguistic competence, culture, motivation, authenticity

**Título:** Hacia la integración de la literatura en el aprendizaje de la segunda lengua

**Resumen**
Un creciente número de investigadores considera que la literatura debería ser integrada en la enseñanza de la segunda lengua, ya que facilita el aprendizaje de los estudiantes en distintos ámbitos. Por ejemplo, no solo es útil en el ámbito lingüístico, sino también en el cultural. Sin embargo, la literatura ha sido tradicionalmente ignorada en el programa de la segunda lengua. El propósito del este artículo es describir los beneficios que ésta puede aportar en el proceso de aprendizaje, teniendo en cuenta los diferentes estudios.

**Palabras clave:** literatura, segunda lengua, lenguaje literario, lenguaje diario, competencia lingüística, cultura, motivación, autenticidad

The integration of literature in the teaching and learning of a second language is currently considered a must by a considerable number of researchers. For instance, Killander (2011: 618) claims that most scholars who have studied the role of literature in language learning conclude that it “should undoubtedly be integrated as an essential part in the FLT”. Nevertheless, literature has traditionally been disregarded in the L2 teaching process and it constitutes a considerable weakness in the Spanish educational context. Hernández (2011: 236) corroborates this when she asserts that “the study of the literature of a foreign language is not part of the primary and secondary education syllabuses in our country”. Furthermore, this may also be tested in the lack of teaching materials designed to teach literature in the L2 classroom (Hişmanoğlu 2005; Lu 2012).

On many occasions, the indifference toward literature may be due to the teachers’ assumption that literary language provides students with samples of a language which is obsolete and which distances from the type of language used in everyday life situations. Nonetheless, this is far from the truth, since “there is a much huge common core shared by literary language and ordinary plain language of communication, namely both are authentic and used by native speakers” (Lu 2012: 240). It reinforces that this traditional assumption which considers that the language found in literature totally differs from speakers’ common use of the language should definitely be discarded. In point of fact, native speakers constantly make unconscious use of figures of speech such as metaphors or hyperboles, which are commonly considered traits of literary language. Therefore, when referring to the features found in literary language, it may be asserted that “these features are not specific to literature since they also recur in ordinary language use and also in nursery rhymes, proverbs and publicity slogans” (Rahimi 2014: 2) and as such, they are widely used among speakers. Lu (2012: 244) goes beyond and assures that the “lack of contact with literary language confines the students’ knowledge to limited...
variety and styles of the target language”. From this statement, it may be concluded that depriving learners of the opportunity to access literature and consequently, to become familiar with some of the most important conventions of both literary and ordinary language, leads to an incomplete knowledge of the L2. Similarly, it may involve the impossibility to gain a high level of proficiency in the language.

1. LITERATURE AND CULTURE

The integration of literature in the L2 curriculum may bring about several benefits to the learning process, being the most outstanding that of culture. Cultural knowledge stands as one of the essential aspects of the second language to be acquired, since it seems clear that the knowledge of the mere linguistic aspects is not enough (Sagredo 2008: 422). For this reason, acquiring familiarity with the cultural aspects of the target language is a prerequisite for learners to become communicatively competent. Divsar and Tahriri (2009: 109) corroborate this when they declare that “language and culture are inseparable, interdependent, and interactive in a way that they are intertwined”. Hence, this closed connection should always be born in mind along the language learning process, becoming one of the main concerns. Nevertheless, the context of the second language has traditionally been disregarded during the teaching process (Biedma Torrecillas 2007: 242). This has meant a negative impact on students, since it has hindered the process of acculturation which they undergo when learning the L2.

Helping learners become familiar with the cultural aspects of the countries in which a language is spoken is not a straightforward task. It requires careful preparation on the part of the teachers, since they need to be aware not only of the need to integrate cultural elements in their teaching, but also to look for the vehicle to introduce them implicitly, so that they may reach the learners’ mind as part of a natural process that reminds the way in which they acquire them in their native language (Biedma Torrecillas 2007). This, which is initially considered a difficult challenge to overcome, may find its solution in the topic dealt with here, i.e., literature.

Literature “is a window opening into the culture of the target language, building up a cultural competence in students” (Hişmanoğlu 2005: 65). Hence, it stands as a valuable source to offer learners an overview of the cultures where the target language is spoken. Indeed, literature grants students direct access to some of the cultural aspects which otherwise would be difficult to transmit. Learners may find in literature information about the social conventions, norms or proper behaviours in a certain culture, allowing them to generate a series of expectations which would in turn help them develop a more empathic attitude toward that culture and its speakers. As Dubash and Anwar (2011: 35) explain, “literature is a wordy representation of culture and culture is an embodiment of habits, customs, social behaviour, knowledge and assumptions associated with a group of people”. This cultural awareness will thus assist them in developing the cultural competence required to become a proficient speaker of the language.

Nevertheless, what really makes literature a good vehicle to transmit culture is how learners access such information. It has previously been underlined the importance to discover a way in which culture may reach students in an implicit manner. Under this assumption, literature plays a significant role. Learners are able to discover such cultural aspects while they are engaged in a process whereby they get pleasure, learning about different characters and life experiences. But, as this process occurs, they are also unconsciously involved in the culture that the text chosen embodies, shaping thereby their cultural competence.

2. LITERATURE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Having reflected upon the benefits that literature brings to the acquisition of the cultural competence, it is now worth considering the advantages that it may have for the acquisition of another important one, the linguistic competence. Hişmanoğlu (2005: 54) discusses “the use of literature as a popular technique for
teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation)”. What literature may contribute to the development of these skills and areas of language may be summarized as follows:

- Concerning the field of reading, learners may gain access to both intensive and extensive sources of reading. Therefore, literature assists them in improving their skills in reading comprehension. Similarly, it offers them the possibility to develop their own set of reading strategies as well as to enlarge their lexicon. Moreover, the fact that the new vocabulary appears within a context will certainly favour its acquisition. In addition to this, they may encounter and internalize new grammatical structures and patterns.

- Regarding writing, literature provides learners with the opportunity to improve their writing skills. Hişmanoğlu (2005: 57) claims that “literature can be a powerful and motivating source for writing in ESL/ EFL, both as a model and as subject matter”. Learners may be asked to read the text with the aim of completing activities such as rewriting part of the work or writing themselves a composition based on that model. This is not only beneficial to improve their writing competence but also to foster other valuable qualities such as creativity. While they are writing, learners are engaged in a process of free creation in which they are encouraged to display their originality in order to express their ideas in a fresh innovative way. Similarly to reading, writing also fosters the acquisition of new vocabulary and strengthens their knowledge of the written conventions.

- In relation to listening, it may be found that this skill is also improved with the aid of literature. Online readings of literary works are currently widely available and can be accessed easily. Learners may listen to the work before reading it themselves. This will allow them to put into practice their listening strategies. In a like manner, they will have the opportunity to become familiar with aspects related to pronunciation such as stress or intonation.

- Finally, regarding speaking, literature stands as an ideal tool to elicit class debates and discussions based on the work being dealt with. These types of communicative activities will aid them to formulate and express their opinions, and to develop their own interpretations (Hernández 2011: 241). It will also have a positive impact on their fluency and their repertoire of speaking strategies. For instance, they will have the opportunity to develop a set of communication strategies while they try to solve the problems that may arise as they speak. Similarly, they will be encouraged to improve their pronunciation and to put into practice new vocabulary and grammar.

In addition to this, it is known that “linguistic competence defines the system of rules that governs and individual’s tacit understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in the language they speak” (Khansir 2012: 242), what is called adequacy. Literature is an efficient instrument for learners to acquire this kind of knowledge, since it provides instances of different situations in which certain structures are used, helping them develop the competence to decide the appropriate linguistic form depending on the context. Furthermore, the integration of literature in the second language classroom allows learners to develop their knowledge of different discourse types (Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi 2012: 209), since it provides them with a variety of different discourse types, which will help them become familiar with a series of linguistic conventions which are contextualized. Once more, as it happens with culture, learners will have the opportunity to improve these aspects of the language in an implicit manner.

3. LITERATURE AND MOTIVATION

Other area that may benefit from the integration of literature in language learning is motivation. Dörnyei (1998: 117) justifies the relevance of learners’ motivation by pointing out that “all the other factors involved in L2 acquisition presuppose motivation to some extent”. Motivation is thus one of the essential factors which
conditions language learning, since it provides learners with a drive which determines the amount of time and effort that they will invest in the learning process. Being motivation such an influential factor, teachers should take advantage of all the resources which may have a positive impact on it. In this regard, Dubash and Anvar (2011: 36) declare that there is “no doubt cultural and literature representation in language classroom enhances the learner’s motivation and probably learners feel more enthusiastic towards language learning”. Literature motivates learners to get involved in a journey of discovery which they can experience on their own. This distances from the traditional teacher-centred approach and gives prominence to the learner’s role. Khatib & Nourzadeh (2011: 258) explain how learners usually get bored in the English classroom, since they find little connection between what they study in class and what they are expected to perform in real communication, and they suggest the use of literature as a solution to end such boredom.

In contrast to textbook topics, “literature’s contents may well be truer to life and more relevant to learners than typical textbook topics” (Sell 2005: 92). This renders the contents more appealing and engaging for learners, who may consider them a real source of experience. In connection with this, Sagredo (2008: 425) claims that “literature offers learning situations which are contextualized and as a result, it makes the learning task more natural and motivating”. It is not decontextualized chunks of language, but rather pieces of language which are part of a whole, meaningful, contentualized text.

A common criticism made to literature in relation to motivation has been that it may result in learners’ demotivation owing to its difficulty. Nevertheless, it has been discovered that “students of English may undergo a real sense of attainment copying with literary materials in the classroom” (Rahimi 2014: 2). It is precisely at this stage when a greater amount of responsibility will have to be held by the teacher. When selecting the literary text to be worked upon in the classroom, they will need to take into consideration aspects such as the learners’ level, their interests, their age, their concerns or the environment surrounding them (Sell 2005: 92), since these aspects will determine the effectiveness of introducing literature in the language learning task. In a study conducted to ESL learners by Lu (2012: 241), it was concluded that “almost all of them thought that the reading of literary texts was a positive experience, because the experiment brought to light their weaknesses in language knowledge, and all of this could in turn facilitate their further learning”. Therefore, the challenge posed by literature is also motivating because it allows learners to self-assess their own learning process and thus, to hold a greater responsibility in such process.

4. OTHER BENEFITS OF USING LITERATURE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Having observed the benefits that literature may bring to the learning process in relation to the cultural, the linguistic and the digital competences, and to the area of motivation, it is now relevant to consider other benefits.

Literature is a source of authentic material (Hişmanoğlu 2005: 54). Texts were not created for the purpose of teaching the language and therefore, learners encounter real language used by native speakers, an aspect which makes the learning task more engaging. This links with another benefit, the role of literature as a never-ending source of materials to be used in the classroom (Hernández 2011: 233). Different works may hence be used to illustrate different functions of the language. In addition to this, literature deals with universal issues which can be related to students’ everyday experiences (Azad, Ferdoush & Yeasmin 2011: 284). This is what renders it a useful framework for students to express their feelings and thoughts and to adopt an empathic attitude. They also find room in literature to develop their interpretative abilities as part of the process involved in working out the meaning of literary works. What has been suggested up to this point is connected with the active methodology focused on students’ participation which is pursued by all the communicative approaches to language teaching and learning.
Bibliographical References


• Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa. BOE 10 de diciembre de 2013.


• Real Decreto 1105/2014, de 26 de diciembre, por el que se establece el currículo básico de la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y del Bachillerato. BOE 3 de enero de 2015.

• Real Decreto 1631/2006, de 29 de diciembre, por el que se establecen las enseñanzas mínimas correspondientes a la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. BOE5 de enero de 2007.
