

La Literatura para la Apreciación de Valores Morales en la clase de Inglés como Idioma Extranjero

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Abstract

In this article we analyze in a brief way and following other authors' guidance, the benefits of using literary excerpts in the English as a foreign language classroom. We comment on how literature in general, and poetry in particular, help students develop a deeper awareness of certain emotions like love, and how these influence their knowledge and analysis of social issues and values. Moreover, we probe into how the scrutiny and understanding of the text helps them empathize with the characters and develop a better understanding of the self.

Keywords: English classroom, Foreign language, Literature, Poetry, Values, Emotions,

Título: Literature for the Appreciation of Moral Values in the English as a Foreign Language Class.

Resumen

En este artículo analizamos, brevemente y siguiendo las obras de otros autores, las bondades del uso de textos literarios en la clase de inglés como segundo idioma. Hablamos de cómo la literatura en general, y en particular la poesía ayudan en gran medida a los alumnos a desarrollar una percepción más profunda de ciertas emociones, como el amor, y de cómo éstas influyen en su conocimiento y análisis de eventos sociales y valores. Además de eso analizamos cómo la exploración y el entendimiento del texto les ayuda a empatizar con los personajes y a conocerse mejor a ellos mismos.

Palabras clave: Clase de inglés, Idioma extranjero, Literatura, Poesía, Valores, Emociones.

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Literature has largely been experienced as a pleasurable vehicle to immerse ourselves in a wide range of different worlds, and to get to know other kinds of people through contact with different characters. It is also a very enjoyable way for readers to have contact with the language. Therefore, teachers of a foreign language could take advantage of these characteristics to exploit literary texts in their lessons. Nevertheless, the use of literary works has not been particularly popular in the second or foreign language classroom, on the contrary, this is usually left to the area of literature studies. In this paper, we will consider some crucial benefits of their exploitation in the foreign language classroom, which in this case is English, for the personal development of students in their adolescence.

Collie and Slater have dealt with the topic of defending the relevance of literary materials in this concern. They have highlighted the priority of drawing on the moral values that can be found in a literary work for a further meaningful education. Here is an example of the reasons they give for using literature with pupils.

One of the main reasons (to use literature in the classroom) might be that literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues, and which is enduring rather than ephemeral. Its relevance moves with the passing of time, but seldom disappears completely. (1987: 3).

There is a very significant idea here regarding the "fundamental human issues"; The Spanish law of education emphasizes and reinforces the idea that school students, 12 to 17 have to become aware of some essential moral principles and to learn about human beings and social values such as tolerance and respect for others. Under the teacher's supervision, a piece of literature can help students become familiar with a variety of different feelings, and by trying to understand these feelings, they are more likely to internalize certain values and social norms. For James Reeves, "The study of poetry is a training of the emotions, that is, a training for life" (Reeves, 1956: 5, cited in Birch, 1989: 61). Reeves further states that "although we may say, then, that poems are made of words, it is really truer to say that they are made of life" (Reeves, 1956: 18, cited in Birch, 1989: 62). It might be argued that poetry is the literary genre which most effectively deals with emotions through words, and that understanding and learning how to practice self-introspection of their emotions is crucial in order to develop one's sense of self identity. This is valuable for taking control of situations

framed by significant strain, something which is of lasting value for the rest of the learners' life, and which any teacher should desire for them. According to F. R. Leavis:

The essential discipline of an English School is the literary-critical; it is a true discipline, only in an English School if anywhere will be fostered, and it is irreplaceable. It trains, in a way no other discipline can, intelligence and sensibility together, cultivating sensitiveness and precision of response and a delicate integrity of intelligence - intelligence that integrates as well as analyzes and must have pertinacity and staying power as well as delicacy [...] (Leavis, 1943, cited in Widdowson, 1975: 72-73, cited in Birch, 1989: 62).

Another important and positive aspect in this sense is that a student at that age is often keen to participate in debates, and many of the topics that they might come across in literary texts are likely to be starting points for stimulating debates in the classroom. Teachers should never forget that during adolescence students feel a strong urge to express their points of view and ideas, so such activities can become positive sources of motivation.

These reasons are essential to create a good and appropriate atmosphere for teenagers in a foreign language classroom. However, we should not forget one of the most important reasons for exploring pieces of literature in a classroom, which is that hopefully, most students are going to enjoy themselves during the learning process. Students interact with the characters, situations and scenes when they are reading and these interactions lead them to create emotional links at the same time that they are examining themes and the moral attitudes, that is, they grow a feeling of empathy. Besides, these interactions help them have a good time, above all if this is combined with appropriate activities and a confident attitude of the teacher:

At schools where poetry is handled with tact and understanding, by teachers who love it and are able to communicate their love of it, boys and girls do not develop the traditional hostility to this form of art, and retain an unashamed pleasure in it which grows with them and which they take away with them into adult life (Strong, 1946: 1).

As Birch (1989) suggests, literary texts are special, but require very careful handling as they are demanding and require great effort and concentration: "you should not expect the reading of poetry to be easy; if you want to get all you can from it, you should be prepared to think hard when occasion demands (Reeves, 1956: 22). "Literature [...] requires specialized individuals to teach it - to nurture it - so that the students themselves can be nurtured and improved as individuals for the good of society" (Birch, 1989: 61).

Thus, teachers play a truly important role in helping learners get the most out of their reading experiences. Moreover, in the end, the ultimate commitment of teachers is to transmit knowledge and understanding to the learners as well as supporting them, and in doing this, any material aids that can be used are well used.

Sanz (2008) talks about this issue of appreciating moral values when she speaks about "the experience of reading poetry, and reading it between the lines" (2008: 90) and she explores Furniss and Bath's idea that "our mental and emotional response to poems is much more than a simply a message" (1996: 63). Sanz participated as a teacher in a "Refreshing Course for Teachers of English in an International Context" (2008: 90), and she decided to use the poems An Irish Airman Foresees His Death by William Butler Yeats, and Anthem for Doomed Youth by Wilfred Owen which she explains as follows:

I selected the texts considering their literary importance, the language features they incorporate, their ability to stand alone, cut off from the works of which they are part, their contribution to a particular non-literary theme, which I chose to be *war*, showing the nature of war, different attitudes to it, war technology, motivations, the politics of war and the constant violence and extremes it produces. Practicing this reading between the lines gave them the opportunity of examining their attitudes towards war, of expressing what they felt and thought about it and of sharing these feelings with the whole group. In other words, we aimed not so much at gaining knowledge about the poems, but at gaining knowledge from them (2008: 90).

She prepares a set of well organized activities divided into three blocks, namely, warming up activities, while-reading activities and post reading activities. Although it is true that in this case she is not working with teenagers, this is a perfectly valid approach for them as well, as long as the texts and activities are appropriate for their level and do not pose a problem for their desire to learn.

In sum, it is a good thing that we teachers have into account the fact that through poetry and by 'reading between the lines', in other words, making the effort to make pupils reflect on the metaphorical or lyrical significance of words, they

are likely to enjoy themselves much more while reading the texts, and it could encourage them to read more widely outside the classroom.

Moreover, in becoming aware of a variety of topics such as war, hatred, or love, students may become more sensitive to the importance of considering such moral issues and feelings, and perhaps more engaged with society's welfare too. Finally, and also very importantly, we may aid kids understand their inner sensitivity and complexities, probably helping them become more empathetic, what in turn could result in a positive influence upon the problem of bullying.

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