



Purposes of Teaching English Literature at University Level: A Critical Study

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Introduction:

Literature, as a school and university discipline, has traditionally enjoyed a high status that has in a way hindered a discussion on its objectives, methods and possibilities as a subject, which have mostly remained untouched for years. Some new proposals, however, have recently been put forward in the case of literature taught in EFL situations. In this special domain, literature is invested with a singularity lending itself to prospects barely explored so far. Within literature teaching, both reading modes are usually present, be it a stylistics or a mainstream literature class. Stylistics has definitely gained a place in literature teaching and certainly a remarkable diffusion in terms of bibliography and research over the past twenty years.

Literature is a subject which for teaching purposes may be divided into three options: (1) as a discipline, to be studied as a cultural product, mainstream option; (2) as a source of materials (texts) to be analysed from a stylistic point of view; (3) as a resource for language learning.

Option 1 is what has traditionally been regarded as «the teaching of literature, that is, a study of plot, characterization, motivation, etc, and also, sometimes overwhelmingly so, a study of the author and their historical and literary background. Lecturing has always been the prevailing teaching procedure. Students take notes, make comments and eventually take tests or exams on the lectures and readings prescribed by the teacher. The reading mode is extensive, although extracts from the works studied can be analysed in the classroom. Lessons are therefore teacher-centred and the whole process tends to be transmissive and product-centred in the sense that the final outcome (usually, a logical, sound interpretation of the works handled), is that expected.

On the other hand, the American tradition has concentrated on the effects of the literary work on the reader much more than on the work itself. This tradition is rooted in the works of philosophers and educators such as John Dewey and George Santayana, and in the literary field was established by critics like I. A. Richards, who developed the concept of «emotional response» in the 1920s, D. W. Harding, and especially Louise M. Rosenblatt,



whose book *Literature as Exploration* signáis the beginning of a new phase in the teaching of literature in the United States at all levéis which rates the individuality and creativity of the reader and the experience derived from reading much higher than a studied and well-grounded interpretation of the literary work.

The merits and real valué of this literary competence are also a question for discussion within the field of literary criticism, brought about mainly by deconstructionism and post-structuralism. Both these movements have some of their roots in linguistics, the former in the theories of C. S. Peirce and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of «linguistic relativism, and the latter in Saussure. Their concepts are also connected with the ideas of scientists like Ludwik Fleck, who introduced the notion that subjective and sociological factors play a decisive role in scientific development.

Deconstruction is not a technique, susceptible to mechanical repetition, and to become a teaching method has certainly never been one of its goals. Therefore its implantation as an academic approach is, by definition, meaningless, at least at undergraduate and graduate levéis or their equivalents. The absence of clear guidelines about what to do makes literature students complain that they would be much more effective academically if teachers were clear about what is expected of them. But to refer back to the development of literary competence, perhaps the best outcome of being literarily competent lies in the open possibility of enjoying reading and being able to judge a literary work, once studies have finished.

Option 2 is the very well-known stylistics option. As we mentioned above, the book which is regarded as the «seminal work for this kind of literature teaching is Henry Widdowson's *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature* (1975), although the term «stylistics is much older than that. In this book, Widdowson listed some reasons to implement stylistic studies. One is that few students go on to do literary research, so there is no need to train them to be literary critics, but rather to provide a basis for developing their interest and enjoyment of literature. C. J. Brumfit and R. A. Cártter, although believing that students and teachers of literature should engage in stylistic analysis, acknowledge some limitations to this procedure.

The use of literature as a médium for language acquisition purposes rather than as an object of literary analysis is fairly new. This can be seen by the recent publication of books on this subject. Traditionally, the idea that literature, especially prose texts, could be used for linguistic purposes was always associated with some kind of literary analysis so that both



were considered inseparable. In other cases, the reading and analysis of full literary works was prescribed. The lack of sufficient comprehension and fluency on the part of students often makes it necessary to resort to activities such as explanation, paraphrasing, retelling, or translation, which constitute sound language practice. In the case of examinations or written assignments, the poor quality of the students' language may distort the content or simply prevent them from conveying it properly. The method is successfully utilized to teach foreign languages to adults in eastern European countries. On the other hand, research has shown that reading input is paramount in order to obtain competence in writing. Writing practice and instruction by themselves will not help writers acquire the code.

Conclusions

It is to be expected that new careers in English, or any other foreign language, will not include a very extensive study of literature, if at all. The study of language will be primarily intended to meet specific purposes, without an academically-oriented description, which is perfectly understandable and legitimate in this type of studies. However, the inclusion of option 3 (literature as resource) is possible in some of these cases. Options 2 and 3 have merits to be included in English language and literature curriculums at university level, even if it is to a different extent from the mainstream literature courses represented by option 1. The frequent use of short stories in the classroom, in this case much more in terms of what is called «intensive reading in foreign language teaching, using the strategies and exploitation techniques suggested above. Luckily, the repertoire of short stories in Anglo-American literature is very extensive, so there is plenty to choose from. No literary analysis has to be carried out in this option, but rather a solely linguistic exploitation of materials.

A comprehensive view of English and American literature in outline, as mentioned before, is essential, as well as specific courses dealing with given works to be read both in and out of the classroom, grouped in terms of genre, literary period, content, etc, implying the exposure of students to background information (cultural, historical, biographical, critical, etc.) relevant to the interpretation (or interpretations) of the works in question, and also promoting their further research. It would not be very sensible, and in fact even frivolous, to assume that they have already mastered this knowledge, or that they will acquire it on their own. The lower one should deal primarily with an introductory stylistic analysis of texts, and also with information about research sources, development of reference skills, etc, whereas the second one



could be entirely a stylistics course focusing on given literary works to be read in an intensive reading scheme, within the classroom, perhaps at a much slower pace than in the mainstream courses and of course, from the stylistic point of view. Reading outside the classroom, leading to stylistic research on literary works chosen by students, could also be contemplated.

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