

Mekioussa AIT SAADA
University of Chlef, Algeria

LITERATURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Introduction

Teaching literature in the mother tongue is far from being an easy task, let alone in the context of teaching a foreign language. Indeed, current observations about the teaching of Anglophone literatures in Algeria show that most students find difficulties to cope with the demands of literary studies. As an illustration, most of their recurrent views about the study of literature are “it is difficult; inaccessible; boring” or simply “what is the interest...” What they expect, in reality, from their studies is mainly to learn an appropriate use and usage of language as a linguistic tool for communication. Besides, these negative feelings seem to be much bred by the current observations about the place given to literary studies. Indeed, a less privileged place is left to the latter since the modern society gives greater importance to scientific and technological advances, for what it expects from education is to provide jobs to its learners, namely to make them autonomous persons.

Thus, in this paper, we would like to highlight the implications of teaching literature in general and in an EFL classroom in particular. We will consider first what it means to teach literature; and secondly, taking the Algerian context as an illustration of teaching English as a foreign language, we would like to shed light on the different exercises involved in the study of literature in an EFL classroom.

Teaching versus Reading Literature

On the report of Johnson (1985: 140), “Teaching literature is teaching how to read ... how to read what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking.” In like manner, Zwzedling, quoted by Showalter (2003: 93), states: “close reading is my introduction and readerly competence is the goal”. On this account, the primary concern of teaching literature is, then, to make learners acquire a certain competence¹ in the field of reading, namely reading interpretively and critically. Johnson adds that what is ‘inside’ the text is not necessarily understood unless reference to ‘outside’ discourses such as philology, history, biography, etc. is made. She also stresses that the relevance and

authority of these external and internal resources should be evaluated or tested for this is what training in reading must be as well (Johnson, 1985: 148).

On the other hand, reading literature should not be seen solely as reading for information or for the isolation of facts that reveal content or the author's message as provided by the teacher. This is, unfortunately, what most learners think the study of literature is about. Consequently, they do not attempt to make their own interpretations by looking at the way language is used by writers to carry the different imbedded meanings. This means that there is a distinction between private reading or reading for pleasure and reading for academic purposes in the study of literature. For the former, a sufficient knowledge of language is needed. For the latter, to understand means necessarily scrutiny according to Hasan (1989: 103). This close attention to the use of language in literature in order to derive meaning is due to the fact that literature is about form above all since it is the "linguistic properties that would make a given text a piece of literature" (Di Girolamo, 1981: 13). Actually, it is the form that determines the structure of the fictional texts as well as the types of response they evoke; that is why it plays a central role in such texts (Steirle, 1980: 103).

As a matter of fact, teachers of literature should be, then, primarily concerned with supplying learners with ways of considering the use of language in literature so as to make them autonomous learners. At that point they would be capable of providing their own interpretations, and of revealing the content by themselves instead of waiting for the teacher's own interpretation of the work which is to be regurgitated during an examination. This is because teaching, as Widdowson (1985: 184) claims, is a means of promoting learning, namely to develop proficiency as a pedagogic objective. In the context of teaching literature, the pedagogic objective is, therefore, to make learners know how to do something, or to develop in them the capacity of interpreting literature as a use of language, which is a precondition of studying it (ibid.: 194).

In short, to study literature presupposes particular processes of reading so as to be able to interpret the texts via a close scrutiny of the language. A close or critical reading is an activity that involves the decoding of the linguistic units, and the complexities of the text as a whole, so as to reach what is conveyed beyond the surface message. However, to attain the deep surface message does not seem to be easy when studying literary works written in a foreign language.

Teaching Anglophone Literatures in an EFL Context

1. Teaching English in Algeria

When Algerian students enter the university, they are between eighteen and twenty years of age, and hold a secondary school degree: the baccalaureate in human sciences, foreign languages, or natural sciences. Although these students have different mother tongues (Algerian Arabic, Berber, French, etc.), classical

Arabic, which is the national language, is their first language of instruction followed by French, the first foreign language taught in primary school at about the age of nine or ten. This is then followed by English, which is the second foreign language but taught at about the age of thirteen or fourteen. This means that these students have been learning English over a period of five years before entering the university.

Though reading excerpts of fiction in both Arabic and French starts at primary school, the teaching of literature is not introduced until learners are in middle schools, and this is carried out at high school, particularly in literary and foreign languages streams, until they get the baccalaureate degree. Indeed, for six years, and in this diglossic context, passages from both Arabic and French Classics are presented for study. The points which are tackled in the modules that are called Arabic Literature and Reading Comprehension during the French sessions are, broadly speaking, general questions about the comprehension of the text that relate to its theme(s), setting, characters,...etc. as well as the study of some stylistic features of the text such as metaphor, personification,...and so forth. In sum, the goal from such study is to make learners have a broad approach to the study of literary texts; but such an exercise is regarded by most learners as mainly a way to prepare them for examinations.

On the other hand, our students have not been accustomed to study Anglo-Saxon literatures in middle and high school. In truth, in the current syllabi of teaching English as a foreign language, through which various types of texts are presented to learners, one can notice that the types of texts studied are essentially journalistic or scientific, or they describe English daily life. The literary text is rare or almost non-existent in the syllabi. If it comes to be used in the classroom, it is not for the sake of studying it for its own right; rather, it is treated as a simple object for global comprehension, and as a means to infer grammatical rules and exercises at the levels of writing and speaking. The features of the literary text are, in fact, not taken into account, perhaps because of their complexities; but this is mainly due to the goal of teaching English as a foreign language, which is to favour communication of daily life as well as that of specialised disciplines such as economy and commerce. This is done, of course, at the expense of acquiring knowledge about culture at large.

Thus, it is not until they start reading for the B.A. that the students are initiated to Anglophone literatures. Indeed, starting from the second year at university, and for the three upcoming years, our students are introduced, for the first time, to a panorama of world literatures (English, Irish, American, and African), written in English.

2. The Study of Anglophone Literatures

When they enter the university to read for a B.A. of English, students have already had some background about how to tackle a literary text in Arabic and

French. Nevertheless, because at this level literature is studied for its own sake as it makes an appeal to literary theory and literary criticism, most students fail to make their own interpretations, and to produce successful literary dissertations. One reason for such a failure appears to relate to students' expectations about their studies of English, namely to acquire a communicative competence.¹

But the acquisition of a communicative competence is not the sole end of teaching English at university; appropriate methods exist for the purpose of this goal. In addition, the communicative competence goes hand in hand with the cultural competence and so the literary as well. Provided that literary studies are part and parcel of the programme, the aim is, therefore, to make students acquire a literary competence, too. As highlighted earlier, the aim of teaching literature is to make learners reach a 'readerly competence'. Still, in the case of teaching literature in an EFL classroom, one cannot deny that having a certain linguistic competence has a pivotal role to play since it can enhance the learners' comprehension of a work of literature while engaging with its linguistic units. This is because the way writers use their primary material which is language to create a world of fiction is what makes it an artistic work in contrast to the ordinary use of language².

The other and main reason for students' inability to cope with the demands of literary studies relates to the fact that they were not accustomed, before entering university, to have resort to literary theory and literary criticism. These

¹ It should be reminded here that the notion of 'competence' was first coined by Chomsky in 1965. In literature, Di Girolamo (1981:85) states that 'literary competence' was put forward by the formalists in the sense of a 'competence of a grammar of deviations'. The first to have defined it in this sense was Beirwisch (1965), and it was adopted by others, though with sometimes little discrepant meanings, such as Ihwe (1970), Van dijk (1972 b), Corti (1976) etc. According to Hasan (1989: 104), it is Culler who first introduced the notion of 'literary competence' in 1975 by analogy with Chomsky's 'linguistic competence'. Chomsky's reference to an average linguistic competence- that consists mainly of the ability to produce and understand 'syntactically acceptable sentences' underlies the existence of types of competence in other aspects of language such as the stylistic, the communicative, and so on- is also true of literary competence. In other words, this competence is a 'partial' one that can be subdivided into different competences, as many as the available institutional literary genres, styles, forms of expression (verse, prose, etc.) and so forth. On the other hand, literary competence differs from other kinds of competence in that it comprises two discrepant capacities, that of producing literary works, and that of understanding them (Di Girolamo, 1981: 85-90). It is this last sense that we are concerned with, viz. a competence of reading that presupposes comprehension.

² Here, the reference is made to the formalists' opposition between the practical and the aesthetic function of language, which reflects the opposition between the standard and the literary language (Di Girolamo, 1981: 21). Slavic formalism, in fact, defines literary language in terms of deviation, or 'écart' to use Valéry's expression, from standard language (ibidem: 15).

go hand in hand, for the basis of practical criticism is literary theory, and the absence of a work of art implies the non-existence of the activity of criticism. In this activity, basic questions concerning the philosophical, psychological, functional, and descriptive nature of a text are asked (Bressler, 1994: 3). Furthermore, it is only a clear, well-defined, and logical theory that enables readers to develop a method through which “they can establish principles that enable them to justify, order, and clarify their own appraisals of a text in a consistent manner” (ibidem: 4).

Last but not least, the other reason of students’ difficulties is due to the intertextual nature of literary writing. Indeed, a major characteristic of most, if not all, written artistic productions is their references to other literary works. The process of deciphering the meaning is, as a result, most of the time hindered since, while reading, one’s comprehension is largely conditioned by his/her past reading experiences. Such past reading experiences do not only have the advantage of filling the gaps found in the text in order to reach a better if not a fuller understanding of the literary work³. They also help readers in responding to and making meaning from the text out of the developed possible frameworks or ‘worldviews’ concerning the nature of the representation(s) of reality in foreign contexts; that is, in contexts not familiar to them because of the discrepant cultural values found in the foreign literary productions compared to the students’ local cultural values.

The Educational Values of Teaching Literature

To develop in learners a capacity of reading interpretively by moving beyond the initial meaning or understanding, and an ability of taking a critical stance is the goal of teaching literature given the host possibilities of interpretations a literary work can offer. The exercise seems at the beginning arduous, but it is all a matter of habit and practice with the aid of the different available literary theories. Therefore, students should take the advantage of the way they had been used to study literary texts.

The outcome of studying literature, either in the native or foreign language, is that it teaches learners a literary methodology, viz. to read, to think, to analyse, and to write critically about works of fiction. In foreign language teaching (FLT), teaching literature has the educational value of promoting an under-

³ To illustrate, we can cite F.S.Fitzgerald’s mention of ‘The Hollow Men’ from T.S.Eliot’s poem (1922) *The Waste Land* in his *The Great Gatsby* (1925); or S.Crane’s reference to C.Norton’s poem *Bingen on the Rhine* in his short story ‘The Open Boat’ (1897), or even M.Twain’s reference to Moses at the beginning of his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to foreshadow the theme of liberation or freedom in the story.

standing of the nature and the use of the foreign written language in other instances, not necessarily academic, as in an advertisement or in newspaper pages. The competence acquired in the field of literature can also be beneficial while listening to a political discourse where students would have to delve underneath the actual message in order to extract the hidden ideology.

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