STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING LITERATURE IN EFL CLASSES: VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES FOR CREATING EXCITING CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES[1]

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Abstract

Literature and language are intricately interconnected. Literature is built by means of language, and in turn all aspects of language are enriched due to the creative and innovative use of language in literary works.

Teaching literature is a truly demanding task, particularly, in the context of teaching EFL where practically little or no room is left for dealing with literary pieces. A number of studies have proved that the benefits of incorporating literature in EFL classes are numerous; still, literature seems to be grossly neglected in the foreign language classrooms.

The study at hand attempts to shed some light on future English teachers' perspectives on teaching literature in EFL classes. More precisely, by conducting structured interviews with second cycle students majoring in the English language and literature at the Faculty of Education – Bitola and doing detailed analysis of their lesson plans, we aimed at ascertaining whether their position towards teaching literature is positive or not; what literary genres they find most suitable for EFL classes; what teaching methods and techniques they

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[1] original scientific paper

would prefer to use in an attempt to integrate literature in EFL classes, and how they feel about utilizing ICTs as a tool for organizing, engaging and stimulating activities for their EFL students.

Key words: literature, teaching, postgraduate students, EFL

Introduction

Teaching literature is considered to be a significant challenge both for teachers and students. On the one hand, teaching literature is expected to provide original and provocative reflections on literary works, while on the other hand, it needs to encourage teachers to create exciting classroom experiences.

This paper aims to reflect on the creativity of future teachers of English language and literature by analyzing their lesson concepts and examining their ideas about different methods and techniques that can be used in the EFL classroom, with special emphasis on the utilization of ICTs as an instrument for incorporating literature in EFL classes. It also deals with the way of developing and applying these concepts to specific classroom situations leading to better understanding and critically evaluating literary works.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. What is literature?

Defining literature is not an easy task. Considerable controversy has been stirred among literary theorists and critics since the ways in which they perceive literature are clearly quite varied. Thus, literature is viewed as 'a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions' (Murdoch, 1978); 'a special use of language which achieves its distinctness by deviating from and distorting 'practical' language which is used for acts of communication (Selden, 1989: 9-10); 'some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf' (Eagleton, 1983: 9) (in Lazar, 1993: 2). Literature is also defined as 'novels, short stories, plays and poems which are fictional and convey their message by paying considerable attention to language which is rich and multi-layered' (Lazar, 1993: 4), and as something that 'plays a critical role in our life… helps us to explore both

ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be…' (Langer, 1995: 5).

Clearly, most of the definitions of literature make explicit mention of the intricate relation between language and literature. This does not mean that literature makes use of a particular type of language, but that it may contain a higher incidence of certain kinds of linguistic features such as metaphors, similes, assonance, alliteration, repetition of words, phrases, double or multiple meanings of words, unusual syntactic patterns, etc. (Lazar, 1993). Skillful usage of such linguistic features is what provides literary pieces with high esthetic valueas well as multiple layers of meaning which, in turn, lead to diverse possible interpretations of one and the same literary work.

1.2 Teaching literature in EFL classes

Teaching literature typically occurs in two specific contexts – literature classes and language classes. Unlike literature classes where literature is taught and studied for the sake of studying literature, in language classes, literature is used as an authentic resource, among many other resources, for promoting interesting language activities. In other words, the former employs literature for developing students' literary competence; whereas, the later gives priority to enhancing students' language proficiency.

In any case, good literature teaching is purposeful and are suit of careful planning (Beach et al., 2006: 41). This means that teachers are required to efficiently plan and undertake a variety of activities such as 'selecting texts, planning activities, leading discussions, formulating writing assignments, evaluating students' interpretations, etc.' (Beach et al., 2006:4), aligned with the goals set in the curriculum or by teachers themselves.

In the context of EFL classes, teaching literature has still not obtained the treatment it truly deserves. In fact, the statement that literature is a largely underutilized resource in many language teaching environments is definitely not far from the truth. As a result, the general tendency in teaching EFL is to leave little or no space to reading and dealing with literary works. Hence, it is hardly surprising that brief mentions of literary works are sparingly scattered here and there in EFL coursebooks.

Despite this doubtful stance towards literature in EFL curriculum on the part of some teachers, students, researchers, parents as well as policy makers (Rashid & Vethamani, 2010), its salience has been confirmed by a number of

prominent scholars. Thus, for instance, Collie and Slater (1990: 3) offer a neat summary of the main reasons for using literature in the classroom: valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Schwarz (2008) puts it in more specific terms and purports that literature should be used in language lessons as reading imaginative literature enhances students' life experience by taking them into imagined worlds; it increases their political and moral awareness; it complements and often deepens their historical knowledge; it enacts important philosophical visions, etc.

Lazar (1993, 14-17), too, offers a comprehensive list of reasons why literature should be used with language students. His list includes the following: literature is very motivating; it is authentic material; it has general educational value; it helps students to understand another culture; it is a stimulus for language acquisition (it provides meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language); it develops students' interpretative abilities; students enjoy it and have fun with it; it is highly valued and has a high status; it expands students' language awareness; it encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings; literature exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language; it encourages students to become broadly aware of the social, political and historical events which form the background to a particular work, etc.

In Daskalovska et al.'s (2012: 1183-1185) terms literature finds its way in the language classroom due to the fact that it exposes learners to a wide range of representational materials which invite them to respond and react, to question and evaluate, to interact with the text, to get involved emotionally and creatively, and to relate it to their own experience. In other words, Daskalovska et al.'s (ibid) claim that reading authentic literary texts is highly desirable for foreign language learners because it 'increases the exposure to the target language, reveals unusual and unexpected uses of the language, stimulates language acquisition (vocabulary, grammar, etc.)and provides a motivating and enjoyable way of learning the language'.

Strong (1996: 291) draws attention to the fact that, among all other things, literature is vital in language teaching because it offers a rich source for mastering the reading skill, i.e. it provides a context in which learners develop their reading strategies. Morrow (2004) comes forth with a similar observation that making room for literature in the language learning environment enhances learners' intrinsic reading motivation.

All in all, what can be concluded on the basis of this overview of the benefits of including literature in EFL classes is that, if used properly and strategically, literature can have more far reaching merits for students than just promoting their language proficiency.

1.3 Models of teaching literature

In answering the question "How to teach literature in language classroom?", one must take into consideration the fact that every teaching situation and every class is different, and so is every literary text. Understandably, most of the differences stem from the reactions to and interpretations of literature which are influenced by a range of psychological, cognitive, affective and social factors (Wallace, 1992: 43, in Daskalovska et al., 2012). Hence, teachers' task is to observe their teaching environment carefully and to select an approach appropriate and relevant to meet their students' needs (Lazar, 1993: 1).

In general, all literature teaching is based on three models of teaching: 1) The Language Model, 2) The Cultural Model and c) The Personal Growth Model (Carter and Long,1991; Lazar, 1993).

The Language Model allows teachers to employ strategies used in language teaching to deconstruct literary texts in order to serve specific linguistic goals. According to this model, detailed analysis of the language of a literary text will help students not only to make meaningful interpretations or informed evaluations of it but, at the same time, it will increase their general awareness and understanding of the English language. The Cultural Model views literature as a source of facts where teacher imparts knowledge and information to students. This model is the most traditional model, and is frequently used in tertiary education. Students acquire the language by focusing on areas such as the history and characteristics of literary movements; the social, political and historical background of a text; literary genres and rhetorical devices, etc. Although it is argued that this type of approach is really the province of the literature teacher rather than the language teacher, still, there are important elements in this model which can be usefully applied to teaching literature in language classes as well. The Personal Growth Model focuses on a particular use of language in a text and in a specific cultural context. Itis a useful

tool for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions and it helps students to become more actively involved both intellectually and emotionally in learning English, thus enhancing their language acquisition considerably (Lazar, 1993: 26). Put differently, the whole person approach empowers students to grapple with the text and its language, and to relate it to the values and traditions of their own society; it stimulates their imagination; it develops their critical abilities and increases their emotional awareness (Lazar, 1993: 19).

Similarly, Beach et al. (2006: 42) propose three models for teaching instruction: 1) text-centered model, 2) student-centered and 3) socio-cultural model. The text-centered model focuses on the uses of language as well as character types, point of view, story development, setting, themes etc. However, this model fails to take into account students' individual differences in knowledge, interests, preferences, needs etc. The teacher is a central figure – an expert who interprets the text and focuses on teaching historical background information about the time and the place shaping the text. The student-centered model, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of students' individual responses to a text, instigated by their knowledge, experiences, beliefs, purposes etc. In other words ,the aim of teaching literature according to this model is to enable students to make connections between their life and the text. Finally, the socio-cultural model aims to create classroom communities designed to foster and respect diverse expressions of different critical perspectives.

In selecting the most appropriate model, as Lazar (1993) points out, teachers need to be guided by their 'students' cultural background, language proficiency and literary background'. Or, to put it in Beach at al.'s terms (2006: 4), 'the teacher's knowledge of the students, the size and gender make-up of the class; the cultural, linguistic and ethnic background of students; the student ability level and motivation etc.' are vital in helping teachers decide how to incorporate and make the most of literary works in language classes.

1.4 Modern (ICT-related/digital) teaching strategies for teaching literature

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have a huge impact on the quality of teaching, especially in terms of the traditional classroom learning. Considering the fact that we live in an era of so-called 'digital natives' skilled with the latest IT knowledge, students become learners with a constant

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demand of more sophisticated teaching methodologies that challenge traditional education systems. Teaching literature seems to be quite resistant to the integration and use of modern technologies, as literature is principally associated with personal interpretation of literary works that could hardly be linked with the practical world of technology. However, it is a well-known fact that the visual is always more effective than spoken words; therefore, in ICT there are plenty of visual aids available such as videos, images, pictures, slides, films, etc. which, if used properly, can 'rejuvenate' teaching literature entirely. As stated by O'Leary (1998: 20-22) "technology use or multimedia is not a teaching method or theory but is a tool that aids teachers improving access to different types of media already in use and it is used to simulate real-life situations and helps learners to have control over the learning process".

Teaching literature encompasses a number of sub-fields such as poetry, drama, prose, non-fiction and media and Sahni (2016: 33) suggests a number of ways how to revive the process of teaching literature, depending on the literary genre. Thus, for instance, in teaching poetry, ICTs can be used in the following way:

1. VCD (Video Compact Disk) related to the poem to be taught may be played for creating the diorama to capture the images and the sounds of the poem.
2. CD (Compact Disk) of instrumental music related to the poem to be taught may be played for producing background music to feel the melody of the poem.
3. CD of standard recitation by native speaker of English language of the poem to be taught may be used for teaching students the correct way of recitation of the poem.
4. Tape Recorder may be used for recording students' way of reciting the poem to be taught to enable them to listen to it later on to improve their ability of reciting the poem

Teaching drama, on the other hand, can be taught as a performing art with the help of ICT in the following ways:

1. Film of the drama to be taught may be used for showing to students to teach them the art of performing a drama.
2. Audio of instrumental music related to the drama to be taught may be used for playing background music to create different moods of the drama.

3. PPT (Power Point Presentation) of natural scenes related to the drama to be taught may be used for preparing background scenery to present different seasons of the drama.
4. Mike and Speaker may be used for creating echo in the sound to increase the intensity of the dialogues of the drama spoken by teachers during teaching.

Prose, too, could be taught in the classroom with the help of ICT in the following ways:

1. Documentary of the novel to be taught may be used for showing it to students to make them understand it in a better way.
2. Videos of various stages related to the short story to be taught may be used for presenting its different stages to narrate it.
3. A Digital Board having moving-text may be used for reading comfortably the long text of prose in large font size to avoid stress on eyes occurring due to the small font size of the printed text.
4. E-newspapers/e-magazines/e-journals may be downloaded for providing them to students to inculcate in them the habit of reading varieties of prose published in them without carrying heavy printed text books.
5. Blogs of various eminent authors of English language may be used for teaching students the latest articles to make them aware of the contemporary trends in prose writing".

To conclude, in order to encourage curiosity among students regarding the English language and literature in the EFL classroom, teachers nowadays are obliged to make use of these "tools" of modern times, i.e. these gadgets of the new generation. This, in turn, leads to creating a virtual learning environment which assists teachers greatly in creating, using ready-made and sharing materials as well in facilitating communication with their students.

2. Research aim and methodology

This study proposes that the process of teaching literature in EFL classes has significant educational values as it enables students not only to develop their language skills, but also to improve their critical abilities and finally to develop their emotional awareness. To put it in more precise terms, the aim of this study is to examine the way postgraduate students majoring in the English language and literature envision the incorporation of literature in EFL class.

The study at hand was conducted with a group of 20postgraduate EFL students at the English Department of the Faculty of Education at "St. Kliment Ohridski" University, Bitola for the period of 2017-2021. One the mandatory courses that these students took was the course titled Literary Foundations in Teaching English. For the purposes of this course the postgraduate students were assigned to read and study Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An introduction*(2003) and *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* by Beach et al. (2012).A special part of their assignment consisted of preparing and delivering lesson plans on teaching literature in EFL classes, on primary and secondary education level, by implementing the theoretical points and the practical ideas presented in the books they were assigned to read. This particular assignment had more than one purpose. The most important purpose was to improve students' teaching skills, but it was also used to prepare them for the subsequent structured interview during which they were expected to orally explain and elaborate on the choices they have made in their lesson plans.

Thus, the research method used for the purposes of this study is mainly based on professors' observations and a regular practice of note-keeping of the versatile activities and ideas proposed by the second cycle students in their lesson plans as well as students' feedback regarding the role of teaching literature in providing original classroom ideas, obtained during the structured interviews.

Based on the findings and insights obtained from the analysis of the students' lesson plans and the structured interviews, in this study we set out to provide answers to five key research questions:

1. What is the students' position towards teaching literature within EFL classes?
2. What literary genres do students find most suitable for incorporating in EFL classes?
3. Which is the most prevailing model of teaching literature in the students' lesson plans?
4. What teaching techniques and activities would the students prefer to use in teaching literature?
5. How do students feel about incorporating ICT-based techniques and activities in teaching literature?

3. Results of the case study and discussion

The analysis of the data obtained in this research showed that the students included in this research agree on a number of issues concerning the incorporation of literature in EFL classes; however, certain differences in their viewpoints and position are clearly visible.

The second cycle students included in this research were almost unanimous in their claim that teaching literature in EFL classes should not be shunned, despite the fact that it is not part of English course books and school curriculum requirements. Given the benefits of exposing EFL students to literature, they agreed that teachers should be resourceful and find ways to incorporate literary works in their EFL classes. They all show awareness that would certainly mean going 'an extra mile' on the part of teachers, who are already have plenty on their plate, as it would oblige them to find appropriate literary pieces, plan and organize activities and motivate students to read the selected works and to participate actively in the tasks they are assigned with. Nonetheless, students' position is that all those efforts are really worthwhile and eventually could be quite rewarding for both teachers and students. Another relevant point made by the majority of the students involved in this study is that the most important element used for enhancing EFL students' language skills, creativity and emotional awareness while teaching literature, evidently calls for assigning regular reading tasks and participation in discussions. In other words, they agree that using literature only sporadically in EFL classes cannot be expected to yield any significant results. On the contrary, according to the students only constant and persistent use of literature can do that. A small number of the interviewed students reported back that they found teaching literature in the context of EFL pretty difficult, particularly due to the fact that literary works are almost completely discarded in EFL course books and teachers have no guidance as to how to incorporate them in their regular teaching practice.

As to the selection of literary texts belonging to different literary genres (poems, short stories, novels and plays) that students find suitable for EFL classes, their lesson concepts and answers in the structured interviews varied considerably. Namely, the larger number of students decided on taking excerpts from novels as the subject of analysis while teaching literature. A smaller number of students opted for teaching poetry. There were also rare cases of students who decided to teach lyrics of famous songs in order to make teaching literature more fun. Plays and short stories were not mentioned at all.

For the purposes of this analysis we will briefly discuss the reasons behind this specific choice of the postgraduate students – novels and plays.

In using novels, second cycle students underline that they are guided by the fact that novels offer real-life settings, develop students' understanding of different cultures and people, stimulate students' imagination, develop students' oral and written language skills and improve their critical thinking ability. Among the students there was almost a general consensus on the importance of the story presented in the novel. The majority of the students shared the opinion that the most interesting were contemporary novels, written in modern vernacular, involving characters of different ages and social status, contemporary themes and appealing settings. Particular themes, motifs, symbols and ideas that are developed in class discussions were another important factor why students appreciated reading novels. They also emphasized the fact that the use of appropriate novels raises motivation and interest in students.

Poetry, on the other hand, was selected by the postgraduate students because they consider it a particularly suitable literary genre for teaching and acquiring language skills. As a specific form of literature, poetry uses aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of language, such as sounds and meter to evoke meanings instead of the apparent meaning delivered by the prosaic forms. Some benefits of reading poetry as obtained from this research are: providing students with different aspects of language applications, motivating students for personal interpretations, provoking new ideas and emotions, making students familiar with the figures of speech such as metaphor, personification, hyperbole, simile, as well as encouraging the creative potential of students to become engaged in writing poetry. Moreover, postgraduate students find the process of teaching poetry to be an encouraging and interesting exercise for EFL students, because it enables them to become familiar with different aspects of language such as: intonation, stress, pitch and juncture.

Students' lesson plans and their answers in the structured interviews showed differences in the use of various models of teaching literature in EFL classes. In fact, the most prevalent model of teaching literature was the text-centered model as mentioned by Beach at al. (2006: 42). This model focuses on the uses of language as well as character types, point of view, story development, setting, themes etc. The teacher is a central figure interpreting the text and focusing on teaching historical background information about the time and the place shaping the text. Some of the students have decided on the socio-cultural model as well. The aim of this model is to create classroom

communities designed to foster and respect diverse expressions of different critical perspectives. It would be fair to conclude that the larger number of students used these models interchangeably, trying to make literary texts more approachable to their target group.

Regarding the teaching techniques and activities students would prefer to use in incorporating literature in their EFL classes, most of their lesson concepts included the following: brainstorming sessions, storyboard teaching, gamification, and using ICT and audio visual materials.

The brainstorming learning technique has the purpose of including everyone in the ongoing classroom activities and in finding out solutions to different cases. Most of the future teachers thought that it would be best to use these types of activities at the beginning of the class by dividing students in groups, pairs or even involving the whole class together. This technique serves to help students to feel free to voice their ideas and helps them in improving their communicative skills.

The storyboard teaching was also mentioned as another way of presenting the learning material. A storyboard is a graphically organized series of illustrations that lay out the key elements of the story. Storyboards are visual tools used to plan out and compose stories presented by visual images, such as comics, cartoons, etc. The storyboard teaching strategy helps students to follow the narrative's main idea and supports details by illustrations of the story's important scenes. Any information told in a form of a story is usually best remembered and this is why the creation of storyboards helps in explaining complex topics in an easy way, because of the visualization of the story. Using storyboards can also improve students' understanding of the literary work as well as develop their imagination overall.

Teaching and learning through playing games is one of the most effective approaches as reported by the second cycle students. According to them, gamification can help the learners have fun and study at the same time. This technique can be used for learners at any education level. The teachers create projects or quizzes and provide additional motivation to encourage their students. The emerging competition makes learners perform better and this is why this technique was frequently mentioned in the lesson plans and the structured interviews.

Using information and communication technology such as: computers, internet, electronic devices (mobile phones, tablets, radio, television or projectors among others) was not very frequently mentioned in the students'

teaching concepts. The use of modern technology into the traditional learning experience is often a topic of public debates on education. The various benefits of using ICT in the classroom were almost always pointed out. Firstly, it provides opportunities for teachers and students to interact simultaneously with ease and convenience. Based on ICT, teaching and learning do not depend on printed materials only. There are multiple resources available online and knowledge can be acquired through video clips, audio sounds, video presentation etc. This is why it is beneficial for visual and auditory learners. Using ICT in teaching also helps to develop learners' imagination and keep them interested and involved.

The data analysis in this research provides conclusive evidence that the ICT and the use of digital equipment, tools and resources, if used effectively, can raise the speed and depth of learning. These technologies appear to be appropriate means to improve some aspects of literacy, especially writing and comprehension. On the subject of teaching literature in EFL classes, the students involved in the research, agree that modern technologies can also help to improve the understanding of the specific themes, motifs and symbols presented in the literary works and bring them into a new contemporary context. However, they still show some reasonable doubt that even though the effects of using modern technology in traditional learning are generally similar to other educational interventions, they may be dampened by the level of teachers' capability to use digital tools and resources. More effective use of digital teaching to improve achievement in schools includes the ability of teachers to identify how digital tools and resources can be used to attain specific learning outcomes and adapt their approach to the new technologies. This will not only prove beneficial for the educators, but for the learners as well.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to produce arguments in favor of the claim that teaching literature in EFL classes provides a solid base for developing students' language skills, creativity and emotional intelligence. The attempt to verify the above-mentioned claim was based on a case study conducted at the English Department of the Faculty of Education at "St. Kliment Ohridski" University, Bitola. It was mainly based on the professors' observations, and their regular practice of note-keeping of their postgraduate students' ideas proposed in

their lesson plans as well as the answers they provided during the structured interview, tailor-made for the purposes of this study.

What can be concluded from the findings of this study is that postgraduate students majoring in English are in favor of incorporating literature in EFL as they fully acknowledge the benefits of teaching literature in the language classroom. Although most of their lesson plans and answers suggest that their preferred method of teaching literature is the text-based method, still it is evident that they show readiness to combine the teaching methods in order to achieve the best possible results with their future EFL students. Postgraduate students find novels and poetry to be particularly suitable literary genres to be fitted into EFL classes. The study presents their perspectives of the implementation of various teaching strategies and techniques for developing original classroom ideas (e.g. brainstorming, storyboard teaching, gamification, etc.). Finally, the students are in agreement that ICT creates countless opportunities for creating exiting classroom experiences. However, despite this generally positive attitude towards utilizing ICT for successful implementation of literature in EFL context, they still show considerable doubts about the actual feasibility of such an undertaking, stemming from the fact that not all teachers have the same capability to identify how digital tools and resources can be used to attain specific learning outcomes and adapt their approach to the new technologies.

All in all, what can be concluded on the basis of this research on the benefits of including literature in EFL classes is that, provided it is used purposefully and creatively, literature can have more far reaching benefits for learners than just promoting their language proficiency.

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