

The Role of Literature and Culture in English Language Teaching

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‘Language is not merely the external covering of a thought;
it is also its internal framework.
It does not confine itself to expressing this thought after it has once been formed;
it also aids in making it’

(Durkheim, 1947).

In John Madden’s 1998 film, *Shakespeare in Love*, Will (Shakespeare, that is) asks his employer Philip Henslow the following question regarding his lack of interest in the writer’s creative process: “Henslow, you have no soul. So how can you understand the emptiness that seeks a soulmate?” (0:05:27). Master Shakespeare in the film (and of course in real life) understood and accepted the task of showing that language is much more than mere “words, words, words;” language is a receptacle and a transmitter of habits, traditions, routines, social and economical context, among many other things and, when mastered via literature or poetry, it can reflect the human soul. Literature and culture in English Language Teaching (ELT) at an undergraduate level can be seen as the bridge between the target language and its soul. They provide students with a closer interaction with English-Speaking countries in the sense that both portray the world in a contextualized situation and open the door to the perception that there is a complex and immanent relationship between grammar and a humanistic interactive field that mutates constantly, since it adapts to the needs of its speakers and changes according to their context.

Literature enhances ELT through elements such as authentic material, language in use and aesthetic representation of the spoken language, as well as language and cultural enrichment. It is with this last element that literature opens the door that leads to a wider and closer look on the culture (or cultures) where the target language is spoken.

Culture, being an interdisciplinary core, offers several perspectives that ELT can also approach such as artistic discourses, social conventions, and reflexive impacts. It also places the object of study as a tree with many different branches that could appeal much more to undergraduate students, who already have fixed interests, according to their respective fields of study. Still, the application of literature and culture in a language classroom must not be random, since the teaching of both disciplines is not akin to the bare transmission of information regarding the people of the target community or country (*c.f.* Thanasoulas 2001, 3). Through this essay I will elaborate on the role of literature and culture in ELT taking into account the features I have mentioned and then exemplify the process in the fashion I have applied it. It is important to mention that I integrate literature and culture within instances including pop music mainly. Thus, literature is not dealt with but in a way more integrated to an intercultural experience.

The Role of Literature in English Language Teaching

Literature can be regarded as a rich source of ‘authentic material’¹ because it conveys two features in its written text: one is ‘language in use,’ that is, the employment of linguistics by those who have mastered it into a fashion intended for native speakers²; the second is an aesthetic representation of the spoken language which is meant to recover or represent language within a certain cultural context.

‘Language in use’ breaks through the static nature that is established by the artificial grammar of a classroom provided by textbooks. There is a common question that sooner or later a student will ask: “where does the English we are learning come from?” Many teachers might remain hesitant in giving an answer. Though the textbook may contain structures, vocabulary and formulas that could lead a reader to think it is an American or British English (depending on the case), class instructors know better. Most of the time the object of study is a mixture of American and British

¹ Joan Collie and Stephen Slater define literature as a source of authentic material in the sense that most works of literature are not fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language. In this sense, students are exposed to a language that is as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom context (*c.f.* 1995, 3). I do agree on the term but I will expand on its connotations further on in my paper.

² This definition must be taken into account that each time that the term ‘language in use’ appears through the text.

English³. That is why it is better to answer that it is a “nowhere English”, artificially standardized, and this is precisely the origin of the conflict; this nowhere English is as neutral as it is rudimentary. It helps students to set up communication with a native speaker but only at a ‘survival’ level. ‘Language in use’ provides students with an approach to the language nourished by different linguistic and rhetorical uses of the language as well as “forms and conventions of the written mode: [...] irony, exposition, argument, narration and so on” (Collie and Slater, 4), and settles the students within a certain geopolitical context, the one the author of the text is referring to through its aesthetic representation.

What authors like Irving Welsh, Joseph Conrad or Mark Twain have in common is that their literary works reconstruct the way language is spoken in certain geopolitical context. These reconstructions provide students with a good idea of how language is used by a contemporary low class youth in Edinburgh, by a native Costaguanan sailor in the early twentieth century, or by Mississippi shore inhabitants in the late nineteenth century. It is important to remind English learners that these reconstructions are no more than aesthetic recreations that in some cases include a critical reflection about the use of language, and not direct samples of language⁴ from those contexts. Paradoxically, literature as aesthetic recreation (that is, as something artificial) can be considered a much more “authentic” source and can inspire more authority in the use and enrichment of language than English textbooks or even than direct samples of language, more so if students develop an “aesthetic reading”⁵ of the text: “el lector está involucrado constantemente en la creación y recreación de mundos imaginarios y temporales (“envisionments”) (Langer 1989, 2 quoted by Zoreda 2003, 61). Through this personal and social experience students can develop a closer relationship with language, since they are reconstructing the target language on

³ If there is even such a thing established by academy as American English, what is its standard? The English spoken in Boston, Kansas, South Carolina or Los Angeles? And the issue becomes more complex for British English, that is, is it a compound of English, Scottish, Irish and Gaelic forms? Where does it get its major influence from: East Anglia, Northern England or the Highlands?

⁴ By direct sample of language I mean a transcription of a monologue, dialogue or discussion; clips from radio, TV or a recorded fragment of utterance from a certain geopolitical context.

⁵ According to Louise Rosenblatt, in an aesthetic reading: “lo que concierne al lector es lo que *está viviendo*, experimentando en su relación con el *texto* durante la lectura” (Zoreda 2003, 56), because “para evocar un “poema” de [un] mismo texto, primero el lector debe permitirse no sólo prestar atención a los significados aceptados de las palabras del texto, sino también a las asociaciones y emociones personales e ideas que experimenta durante la lectura” (Zoreda, 57).

their own for their own learning process. Nonetheless, the enhancement of language enrichment is not limited to what this sort of dynamic offers.

Language enrichment, whether it is through an aesthetic reading or an “efferent reading”⁶ of a literary work, provides a “rich context in which individual or lexical items are made more memorable” (Collie and Slater, 5). A literary text provides students with a much clearer idea about the syntactic structure of a written text and to what extent written language differs from spoken language. By getting used to the formation and function of sentences, to the structure of a paragraph, a section or a chapter, their writing skill improve and their speech skill can gain eloquence. Of course, students considerably expand their vocabulary by being exposed to a literary text. Looking up words, however, is quickly followed by looking up cultural references⁷ and this process leads to cultural enrichment.

In an efferent reading the text can offer a variety of information regarding the cultural context of the geographical location that it portrays. As they read, students get an idea of the contemporary or historical way of life where the story is taking place and thus develop insight into the country that speaks the language they are learning. An efferent reading focuses on descriptions of landscape, weather, architecture, decoration, dress, customs and traditions, among other things, which enhance vocabulary, language, and a cultural insight. This approach, however, presents two major disadvantages. On the one hand, an efferent reading keeps the students alienated from the text and language, as it prevents what Robert Scholes described as an active environment of creative experimentation at a personal and collective level (Zoreda 59). On the other hand, cultural insight is very superficial due to the nature of the efferent reading, since readers only follow the leads provided by the text itself, thus missing the intertextual references the literary work may offer. In order to avoid these deficiencies in the classroom, the efferent reading must be supported with the virtues an aesthetic reading offers. In an efferent reading the text is regarded as a closed and finished object that a student can only contemplate passively from the perspective established by the teacher (which in many cases is an institutional perspective)⁸. An aesthetic reading helps students make connections between the text

⁶ “An ‘Efferent’ reading, according to Rosenblatt, is reading for the purpose of getting information. When we read from an efferent stance, we focus more on content than on form, paying more attention to the writer's message than to how that message is delivered”. (“Thoughts on Pedagogy”)

⁷ Especially if students are involved in environment building.

and their own cultural context, as well as consider the influence that the literary work and the target language have on their own identity. As for cultural insight, an aesthetic reading conveys the notion of “transaction” that Rosenblatt defines as: “un proceso en el curso del cual los elementos o factores son, uno puede decir, aspectos de una situación social; cada uno condiciona al otro y, a la vez, se condicionan mutuamente” (Zoreda 55). Intertextual references not only make reference to another literary text, but also to an entire cultural experience determined by the socio-historical context. Exploring these connections and reflecting on them lead students to develop a major understanding of the way of life of the context the target language comes from, and furthermore, these references open the door for students to visualize how the literary text overflows to other cultural disciplines, establishing a symbiotic, nourishing relationship. By exploring these other paths offered by the target culture, a universe of possibilities is opened for the study of a foreign language where students can weave their own experience and life with these disciplines (arts, politics, sports), accomplishing a close empathy between language and their way of life.

The Role of Culture in English Language Teaching

The debate about whether or not to include culture in a language classroom is long past; now the discussion points to a matter of method⁹. Claire Kramersch remarks that it is important to be aware that culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill; it is present within writing, reading, listening and speaking. She emphasizes the

⁸ I am not referring to “institutional” as a pejorative concept but as the most common reading a literary text may have and that sometimes it is taken, by some, as the “proper” reading of a work. As Rosenblatt comments: “Leer para encontrar la respuesta a una cuestión objetiva (factual) requiere concentrarse principalmente en los aspectos públicos del significado y excluye a la periferia aquellos sentimientos personales que fueron activados” (Zoreda 56).

⁹ Which at some point arose from the predicament of establishing a definition of culture, and continues to be an obstacle. I will use Claire Kramersch’s observations as a starting point:

Culture constitutes itself along three axes: the diachronic axis of time, the synchronic axis of space, and the metaphoric axis of the imagination [...]. Teaching culture means therefore teaching not only how things are and have been, but how they could have been or how else they could be. Neither history nor ethnography provide this imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own [...] culture is arbitrary, which doesn't mean it is gratuitous, only that different events could have been recorded if other people had had the power to record them, different patterns could have been identified, these patterns in turn could have been differently enunciated; which is why culture, in order to be legitimate, has always had to justify itself and cloak its laws in the mantle of what is "right and just" rather than appear in the naked power of its arbitrariness. (Kramersch 3).

role of context and the circumstances in which language can be used accurately and appropriately. (*c.f.* Kramsch 1). Culture offers ELT a vast landscape of perspectives that can be employed to enhance the dynamics of a class; even more so among undergraduate students, who have already chosen a certain area of study and may show antipathy or apathy to a teacher's ambitious lesson plan if they do not consider it relevant. So, it is important to know the methods that a teacher might employ in order to avoid "teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning" (Politzer, 100-101).

Dimitrios Thanasoulas pinpoints that up to now there have been two perspectives that have influenced culture teaching and that have served as a model for integrating it to language teaching¹⁰:

One pertains to the transmission of factual, cultural information, which consists in statistical information, that is, institutional structures and other aspects of the target civilization, highbrow information, i.e., immersion in literature and the arts, and lowbrow information, which may focus on the customs, habits, and folklore of everyday life (3).

Just like an *efferent reading*, all this perspective offers is mere data unable to provoke a deep reflection in the class, and that restricts teachers and students to a mere awareness of the way of life of the country where the information has been taken from. Since there is no other lead around this information that could direct students to contextualize it, their idea of the culture of the country that produces this "amounts to facts," and could remain as sterile as if it came from a printed travel brochure. The other perspective, which draws upon cross-cultural psychology or anthropology, "has been to embed culture within an interpretive framework and establish connections, namely, points of reference or departure, between one's own and the target country" (Thanasoulas 3). According to the author, the limitations of this approach are that it can only give learners cultural knowledge and leaves it to them to integrate it with the assumptions, beliefs and mindsets of their own society. This, however, is where the role of the teacher can make a difference. Like in an aesthetic reading, the teacher needs to guide the students so that they can construct their own interpretation and reflections according to their own experience, by first thinking critically and then comparing and contrasting the two different cultures. In order to avoid a process similar to the application of Eco's theory about the open work, the teacher must

¹⁰ Curiously, these two perspectives recall Rosenblatt's theory of the efferent and aesthetic approach to a literary text.

provide guidelines to prevent overinterpretation and make sure that their critical opinion is firmly grounded. The students may not only find the influence of the target language culture in their own, but they can also develop a critical appreciation about how this culture has been transformed and adapted by their own, and what their culture's response has been. The teaching of culture, then, is seen as a means of 'developing an awareness of, and sensitivity towards, the values and traditions of the people whose language is being studied' (Tucker and Lambert 26). At the same time, it reinforces the values and traditions of the students' own culture, and thus makes them, in a sense, more sympathetic human beings and citizens of the world¹¹. From this point of view this can be called an intercultural communication. According to Michael Byram, the process of intercultural communication is a function of the skills a person (in this case a student) brings to the interaction. These skills can be divided into two categories: 1) Skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures, which involve the ability to analyze data from one's own and from another country and the potential relationship between them. 2) Skills of discovery and interaction. This involves the discovery of new data and the interaction with other speakers. These skills are gathered in the same category because most of the times the skills of discovery come with the skills of interaction. Skills of discovery, nevertheless, can be operated in some circumstances independently from skills of interaction (*c.f.* 1997, 33). As well as Rosenblatt, Byram has implemented a model for including an *intercultural approach* to ELT. The components of said model are the mentioned skills (which Byram categorizes under the term *savoir*) that interact with linguistic and discourse components of the language, resulting in the intercultural communicative competence. These components are:

Savoir: cultural knowledge that includes sociolinguistic competence as well as the awareness of reference points such as values, beliefs and meanings.

Savoir apprendre: The skill of discovering and/or interacting.

Savoir comprendre: The skill of interpreting and relating to the other.

Savoir s'engager: Critical cultural awareness.

Savoir être: The skill of understanding how identity and culture are socially constructed (*c.f.* 1997, 34).

¹¹ This notion is conveyed in the model of Intercultural Communicative Competence proposed by Michael Byram in his book *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (1997), as he comments: "[I]t is important to remember that the interaction between two individuals can only be fully understood when the relationship of the 'host' to the 'visitor' is included. The mutual perceptions of the social identities of the interlocutors is a determining factor in the interaction" (32).

Still, the employment of this model to the ELT is *sine qua non*. There are many factors to be considered, such as relating new information to existing knowledge, the use of organizing principles to relate conflicting phenomena, and vigorous and critical interaction with knowledge and experience. So, it is fundamental, as Rosenblatt's perspective of *aesthetic* reading has already established, to keep the communication channels between students and teachers open in order for cultural feedback to run freely from ones to the others. This in turn maintains the active environment of personal and collective creative experimentation.

In the end, the role of culture in ELT is crucial, since it will mean the difference between casual speakers who remain outsiders and speakers who understand the meaning behind the words and the world that is constructed by them. As Samovar, Porter, and Jain observe:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication (24).

Thus, when foreign language learners that have been taught the culture alongside the language encode their messages, they will not do so from a void, but from a deep understanding of what they are saying, its implications and history. They will be able to do much more than communicate simple needs and ideas, and they will be much better equipped to interact within the target language culture and truly give something back and participate in it.

Applying Literature and Culture in the English Teaching Classroom

The following is an example of how I have incorporated literature and culture in an intermediate English language class at UAM Azcapotzalco. In this example I have taken into account Rosenblatt's concepts of *efferent* and *aesthetic* reading as well as some concepts of Byram's model for Intercultural Communicative Competence. The text that I employ is Pink Floyd's song "Astronomy Domine"¹². The main branches of culture that I use in this example to support this intercultural English language class

¹² This song is included in Pink Floyd's first album *The Piper at The Gates of Down*.

are literature and music; further on I incorporate some other artistic disciplines to the analysis such as film, comic and television, due to the requirements of the chosen text. This media context has given me the opportunity of using CAILE (Centro de Aprendizaje Interactivo de Lenguas Extranjeras) in order to perform a thorough class and analysis which also enhances the sense of integral learning by the development of communicative skills in foreign language learning through technology¹³.

a) Methodology

This analysis is divided in two sessions of one hour and a half. The classroom where these sessions are meant to be developed should be properly equipped with a CD player and a multi-region DVD player, a video projector, a laptop, internet access, and a blackboard¹⁴. In the first session the topic of the lesson and the song are introduced to students; analysis and critical reflection will be restricted to the written and audio text¹⁵, whereas in the second session the aspect of performance will be taken into account. Also, the discussion on the impact of this work in Mexican culture will take place in this second session. In the first session, the approach to the lyrics and audio analysis will follow the process of the *effere*nt reading, but this must occur in order to give students some critical background on pop music analysis as well as some factual elements from the song and its *savoir* so they can trace an order of ideas regarding their critical reflection on the work. In the second session it is expected that students will generate their own critical process, so they will be able to develop an *aesthetic* reading of the song and develop the different *savoirs* Byram proposes in his method. Thus students can elaborate about the intercultural process that is established between “Astronomy Domine,” British pop music and Mexican pop culture, and their personal experience.

¹³ Which is another feature of intercultural methods in ELT.

¹⁴ This is why the CAILE becomes of main importance for this purpose.

¹⁵ I do not refer to this part of the song as musical text because most of the time the audible text not only includes music but other types of elements, considered paramusical, such as vocal persona, atmospheric and incidental sounds, performative noises, etc.

b) Description of the process

The first session begins with a warm up; students are introduced to the topic, the role of pop music in culture. Students are prompted to comment on their own experiences about this subject and give their opinion about the impact that British pop music has had in Mexico. Then the discussion will become much more specific when it turns to the influence of Pink Floyd and Syd Barrett on British and Mexican Culture. Then, the text that illustrates the topics of pop music in culture and British pop music's impact in Mexico will be introduced; which, as I have already mentioned, is the song "Astronomy Domine"¹⁶.

The lyrics of the song will be handed out to students, but they will also be projected on a screen in order to make participation more dynamic¹⁷. In this first approximation students will have to comment about the story narrated and the possible meaning of the song. They will be asked about the elements that lead them to their observations and the importance of the grammatical tense. Then they will be asked to comment on the references that the song conveys from the title to the second stanza. They will be given leads¹⁸ on color semiotics in arts, on literary tradition (Coleridge and Shakespeare), on Elizabethan cosmogony, on the fairy folk tradition, and on British pulp and comic tradition¹⁹.

On the second part of the analysis, the song will be played for students to comment on the audio text. Like before, they have to comment on what this text evokes to them and which references they recognize. What differs from the previous section is that instead of giving leads about the origin of these references²⁰, students must comment about similar elements in Mexican culture, as they elaborate on such references and how these became integrated into a context of national identity.

¹⁶ I have chosen "Astronomy Domine" because through my language teaching experience I have obtained an excellent response from students to the song. This is due to the impact the rock band Pink Floyd and its former leader Syd Barrett have had in Mexican pop culture.

¹⁷ The lyrics of the song can be found at this link <http://www.pink-floyd-lyrics.com/html/astronomy-domine-piper-lyrics.html>.

¹⁸ Texts and images that illustrate these leads are included on the appendix Power Point.

¹⁹ It should not be expected that students provide academic comments on each one of these aspects, but only with their own cultural background. Sometimes most of the leads go unnoticed or do not awake interest in them, but it just takes one of them to make the session productive. For example, this is where a first critical comment under the intercultural shroud occurs, because the semiotic of color differs in the European and Mexican traditions.

²⁰ The origin of some of these references can be discussed later if students want to.

The second session should start with a warm up activity, where a recapitulation about what was commented on the first session should take place. This will not only refresh the class about what had been said about the written and audio texts, but it also may provide new opinions on the subject. Some students may have thought about the matter. Following this the performative text is introduced. A clip²¹ of Pink Floyd performing “Astronomy Domine” will be shown to the class. This clip comes from a 1967 BBC show called “The Look of the Week.” Before the performance the group is introduced by Hans Keller²², where he established some points, foreshadowing what his critical comment is going to be. Two questions that students must think about derive from his introduction; the first is: “Should pop music be observed and analyzed with the same critical apparatus as music?” The other is: “What does a Mexican undergraduate student in 2008 think about this question?” On the latter dialogue, some other perspectives about Pink Floyd’s performance are discussed between Keller, Roger Waters and Syd Barret. This will open the door to the next part of the discussion with students, as they should comment on the opinions of both parties, adding their own perceptions about Pink Floyd’s performance.

The last part of the session, and therefore of the analysis, regards the impact of “Astronomy Domine,” Syd Barret and Pink Floyd in Mexican culture, a comparison between this song and “Odisea Burbujas,” Syd Barrett and Juan García Esquivel (author of the second work) as tragic art heroes and the influence of space-age music on Mexican rock²³. Finally, there will be time for some final observations on the subject and on the nature of these sessions.

With this exercise, the students discover more about their own identity and culture by observing themselves in the target language culture and analyzing how much of it influences their own, thus discovering “the foreigner within themselves”. As for their English language skills, the exercise combines vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and listening skills, which are practiced throughout in a dynamic, non-artificial manner.

²¹ This clip is included in the directory of the appendix.

²² Alison Garnham writes in the backcover of his book, *Hans Keller and the BBC: The Musical Conscience of British Broadcasting, 1959-79* the following: “Hans Keller (1919-1985) was an Austrian-born British musician and writer who made significant contributions to musicology and music criticism, and invented the method of 'Wordless Functional Analysis' (in which a work is analysed in musical sound alone, without any words being heard or read)” (2003).

²³ Images of these artists are included on the appendix power point.

Conclusions

Literature and culture in ELT provide elements and perspectives through which students cease to regard a foreign language as a harsh and cold code used by people who have little to do with their own context or identity. Through literature as well as culture, students establish an intimate connection with the target language as they become aware of how much this is a living system that changes and mutates according to the needs of its native and foreign language speakers. They also realize that their own personal, social and historical context has been influenced by a foreign language and a foreign culture and how, in a symbiotic process, this other culture has been nourished by their own. This vision of the world is arises from the elements that literature and culture offer to ELT.

Literature is a source of authentic material, which conveys the use of linguistics by those who have mastered it into a fashion intended for native speakers, and an aesthetic representation of the spoken language, which enriches students' language and culture.

Culture, on the other hand, offers an interdisciplinary field that includes artistic discourses, social conventions, and reflexive impacts. It opens the door for students to increase their knowledge of the target culture as they can contemplate and critically comment on people's way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and regard how these elements manifest in linguistic categories and forms.

The inclusion of literature and culture, however, must follow a pedagogic model, like those proposed by Rosenblatt and Byram that deal, respectively, with literature and culture. With these tools, teachers can create programs and lesson plans in order to avoid getting lost in the middle of factual data that can result in a sterile application of literary and cultural elements that prevent students from interacting and developing any critical consideration on the mater, thus remaining simple recipients of linguistic symbols and codes. Like Master Shakespeare shows his audience in Madden's film, language found a soulmate in literature, and they are inserted in a mystical halo called culture. Together, they lead us to acknowledge that, at any level, language deals with human nature and at some point, it is capable of projecting its soul.

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