

1 Using literature in the language classroom: The issues

The emphasis in this chapter is mainly on exploring some of those underlying issues and concerns relevant to using literature with the language learner. It is not the aim of this chapter to focus on the development of materials for immediate use in the classroom, although many of the points raised in this chapter will have a bearing on what approaches and materials are finally selected. Rather, a number of thoughts and ideas are raised for reflection and discussion. Some of these thoughts and ideas should help in making more principled and coherent classroom decisions about why and how to use literature in language lessons. However, ideas generated in this chapter will not help to pinpoint the definitive, right or correct way to teach or use literature. This is because every teaching situation is different, every literary text is different and every theory explaining literature itself or how to use it in the classroom is different. The task for teachers is thus to draw on the range of insights available, and then to develop an approach appropriate and relevant to their students.

1.1 What is literature?

In this section we think about some of the possible ways of defining literature. This will enable us to focus on some of the implications of using literature with the language learner.

Task 1 ☆

A group of teachers from all over the world were each asked to write down a definition of literature. Read through their definitions and then write down your own definition of literature.

- Literature is 'feelings' and 'thoughts' in black and white.
- Literature is the use of language to evoke a personal response in the reader or listener.
- Literature is a world of fantasy, horror, feelings, visions . . . put into words.
- Literature means . . . to meet a lot of people, to know other different points of view, ideas, thoughts, minds . . . to know ourselves better.¹

Task 2 ☆

Here are a number of other quotations which 'define' literature. As you read them, think about the following questions.

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- a) Are there any similarities between the definitions given here and the ones above?
- b) Which definition(s) do you reject? Why?
- c) Which definition conforms most closely to your idea of what literature is? Why?
- A. Literature could be said to be a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions. (Iris Murdoch, *The Listener*, 1978.)
- B. Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. (Ezra Pound, *How to Read*, Part II.)
- C. The Formalists' technical focus led them to treat literature as a special use of language which achieves its distinctness by deviating from and distorting 'practical' language. Practical language is used for acts of communication, while literary language has no practical function at all and simply makes us see differently. (Selden, 1989, pp. 9–10.)
- D. . . . one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf, than as a number of ways in which people relate themselves to writing. It would not be easy to isolate, from all that has variously been called 'literature', some constant set of inherent features . . . Any bit of writing may be read 'non-pragmatically', if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read 'poetically'. If I pore over the railway timetable not to discover a train connection but to stimulate in myself general reflections on the speed and complexity of modern existence, then I might be said to be reading it as literature.¹ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 9.)
- E. Literature is the question minus the answer. (Roland Barthes, *New York Times*, 1978.)
- F. In the allocation of the label 'great literature' to a literary work we cannot be making a judgement which is objective or factual, however much we like to think that we are. A value judgement is constituted by the social and historical conditions which determine our particular ideology. The teachers and professors who have the power to decide which books make up an English Literature syllabus reflect in their choices, and in the knowledge of the literature which they purvey, a fundamental structure of beliefs and interests which reflect the particular culture or section of society into which they were born and in which they grew up. (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 17.)
- G. Literature, fiction, poetry, whatever, makes justice in the world. That's why it is almost always on the side of the underdog. (Grace Paley, *Ms*, 1974.)

What is literature?

Task 3

Each one of the quotations in Task 2 has certain implications for the approach we adopt to using literature in the language classroom. These implications are examined in the seven paragraphs below. Match each paragraph with the relevant quotation in Task 2.

1. One of our main aims in the classroom should be to teach our students to read literature using the appropriate literary strategies. This involves them not in reading for some practical purpose, for example to obtain information, but rather in analysing a text in terms of what it might mean symbolically or philosophically. Students may have already acquired this kind of literary competence in their own language, in which case we simply need to help them to transfer these skills. If not, we need to find ways of engendering the necessary competence.
2. Our main task in the classroom is to pinpoint how far literary language deviates from ordinary language. This obviously poses a problem for students – to what extent will they be confused or misled by studying deviant rather than normal language, and how far is this a useful activity for them?
3. Literary texts have a powerful function in raising moral and ethical concerns in the classroom. The tasks and activities we devise to exploit these texts should encourage our students to explore these concerns and connect them with the struggle for a better society.
4. The texts traditionally prescribed for classroom use may generally be accorded high status, but often seem remote from, and irrelevant to, the interests and concerns of our students. In fact, being made to read texts so alien to their own experience and background may only increase students' sense of frustration, inferiority and even powerlessness. We therefore need to select texts for classroom use which may not be part of the traditional literary canon, but which reflect the lives and interests of our students.
5. Our main aim when using literature with our students is to help them unravel the many meanings in a text. Students often need guidance when exploring these multiple levels of meaning in a literary text – we need to devise materials and tasks which help them to do this.
6. Literature provides wonderful source material for eliciting strong emotional responses from our students. Using literature in the classroom is a fruitful way of involving the learner as a whole person, and provides excellent opportunities for the learners to express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings.
7. We should not expect to reach any definitive interpretation of a literary text with our students. Rather we should use the text as the basis for generating discussion, controversy and critical thinking in the classroom.

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Task 4

Think about a group of students you are teaching now, or have taught in the past. Perhaps you have used some literature with them already or perhaps you are planning to do so. Do any of the thoughts or ideas mentioned in the previous three activities seem relevant to your teaching of these students? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there any other implications arising from the various definitions of literature which you think should be considered with regard to these students?

Task 5

Figure 1.1 is a diagram which recaps and sums up some of the questions and thoughts raised about literature in Tasks 1 to 3. Look at it and then decide if there are any more ideas you want to add. Then think back to your original definition of literature in Task 1. Do you still agree with it or would you like to change it in some way? Why?

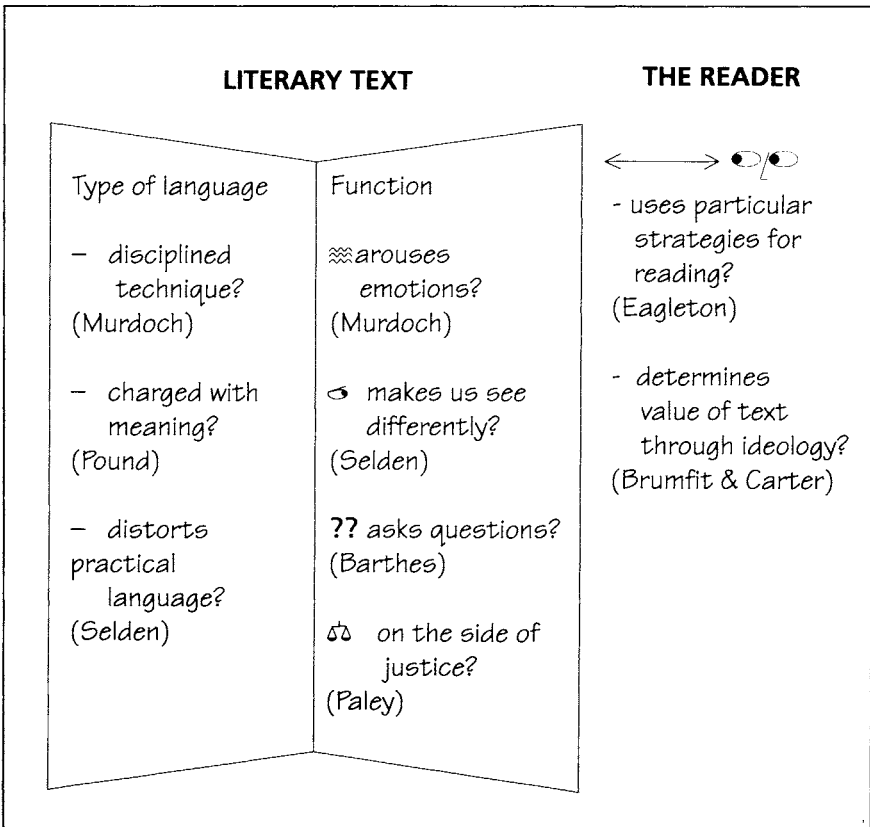


Figure 1.1 Defining literature: the issues

What is distinctive about the language of literature?

We have seen that defining literature is no easy task, and that there is considerable controversy among literary theorists and critics as to how this can be done. For the purposes of this book, we will take literature to mean those 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. In order for our definition of literature to be relevant to the classroom teacher, we will also go beyond the traditional literary canon to include contemporary works which recognise that the English language is no longer the preserve of a few nations, but is now used globally.

1.2 What is distinctive about the language of literature? ☆

One of the views of literature suggested in the previous section is that literature involves a special, or unusual, use of language. In this section we explore this idea further and consider any classroom implications arising from it.

Task 6

Here are a number of different texts. Read through each one and decide whether or not you think it is a literary text. If not, then think about where the text might have come from. Note down any language in the text which helped you to make your decision.

- A. As this is a small Edwardian terraced house with limited natural light, Venetian blinds were chosen to cover the windows. They screen the street scene during the day and add to the impression of space given by the light walls and modern furniture. Curtains in deep coral would have looked heavy, but the sunshine that streams through the blinds keeps the overall effect light.
- B. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it as the wind does at sea.
- C. His breast of chicken with tarragon and giroles goes back to the classic French repertoire: the skin of the fowl crisped to gold, odoriferously swathed in a thick creamy sauce, golden also, piled with fleshy mushrooms fried in butter till they take on the gleam of varnished wood.
- D. Just because we're deaf, it doesn't mean we've nothing between our ears.

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- E. Cousin Nwankechukukere came back with a wardrobe the size of the Eiffel tower and such impressive ideas indicative of her profound study of de Gaulle, the Common Market and slimming. She had become a woman. She even changed her name. There was no fanfare about this. I had expected the usual insertion in the papers: 'I, formerly known, called, addressed as . . . shall from today henceforward be known, called, addressed, etc.' and the bit about 'former documents remaining valid'. But no. Cousin Nwankechukukere just changed her name to 'Nwa'. To me there was a delicious crunchiness in 'Nwan-ke-chu-ku-ke-re', a crunchiness redolent of fried corn and groundnuts eaten with coconut. It was a pity to lose all that. Furthermore Nwankechukukere as a name should give the bearer a superiority complex. It is a name which literally means 'She-who-is-made-by-God.'
- F. Three grey geese in a field grazing;
Grey were the geese and green was the grazing.
- G. She's been working on the project all week, but she's starting to run out of steam. She doesn't feel that her mind is operating any more.²

In Task 6 you may have found it quite difficult to identify which texts are literary and which ones are not. This is probably because there is no specialised literary language which can be isolated and analysed in the same way as the language of specific fields, such as law; or specific media, such as newspapers. It is also perfectly possible to imagine a literary context for many of the more obviously non-literary texts. For instance, example G. is an invented utterance, but it could easily be imagined as part of a dialogue in a play, novel or short story. Perhaps it is difficult deciding which texts are literary because one of the hallmarks of literature is that it feeds creatively on every possible style and register – it has become the one form of discourse in which any use of language is permissible. At the same time, many linguists have pointed out that there are a number of features of literary language which can be isolated. Many of these features occur in other forms of discourse as well, but in many literary texts they combine to form a highly unified and consistent effect, which strongly reinforces the message of the text (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 8). Let us try to pinpoint some of these features.

Task 7

On the opposite page is a list of some linguistic features believed to be prevalent in literary texts. Read through the extracts in Task 6 again, and note down any examples of the linguistic features listed below. The first one has been done for you.

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Gillian Lazar

Excerpt


[More information](#)

What is distinctive about the language of literature?

Linguistic feature	Example(s) in text
<i>Metaphor</i>	the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling (B.) to run out of steam/her mind isn't working (G.)
<i>Simile</i>	
<i>Assonance</i> (repetition of vowel sounds)	
<i>Alliteration</i> (repetition of consonants)	
<i>Repetition of word or phrase</i>	
<i>Unusual syntactic patterns</i> (e.g. reversing the order of subject and verb)	
<i>Double or multiple meaning of a word</i>	
<i>Poeticisms</i> (poetic lexis)	
<i>Mixing of styles/registers</i>	

We have already said that literature does not constitute a particular type of language in itself, but that it may reveal a higher incidence of certain kinds of linguistic features which are tightly patterned in the text. The features listed in Task 7 are generally considered to be among those which tend to predominate in literary texts. On the other hand, we have also seen that they can be found in other forms of discourse as well, for example:

- metaphors and similes are used in everyday colloquial speech;
- assonance and alliteration can be found in children's rhymes and advertising jingles.

Task 8 

Look again at the list of linguistic features we considered in Task 7. Next to each one write down any form of discourse, other than literature, in which you think you might find this feature.³

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In this section we have explored the notion that literary language is relative rather than absolute, in that certain texts or parts of a text may exhibit more of those linguistic features associated with literature than others (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). Literary language is therefore not completely separate from other forms of language. This obviously has some implications for the use of literature in the language classroom. Think about your views on this as you complete the statements below.

Task 9


Read the statements below and complete them by choosing (a) or (b), according to your views on literary language and teaching.

1. Since literary language is not completely different or separate from other kinds of language
 - a) there is no real point in using literature with language students.
 - b) studying literary texts can help to improve students' overall knowledge of English.
2. By contrasting literary texts with other forms of discourse
 - a) the superiority of literary language can be demonstrated.
 - b) students can be sensitised to the wide range of styles in English and the different purposes for which they can be used.
3. Reading literary texts
 - a) will help our students to understand and appreciate multiple levels of meaning, metaphors and phonological patterning in many other types of texts.
 - b) is a limited skill which does not transfer easily to the reading of other types of texts.
4. In order to appreciate a literary text
 - a) students will need some assistance in understanding and analysing the linguistic features which make up a text.
 - b) imagination and intuition are all that are needed.

1.3 The reader and the text

In the previous section we concentrated on looking at the literary text and on the extent to which there are objective properties of literary language which clearly differentiate literature from other forms of discourse. In this section we transfer our attention to the reader of the text, which for the purposes of this book is usually the student of English. Below are two examples of ways in which the reader's experience has a bearing on the way a text will be interpreted.

The reader and the text

Task 10 

Read both examples and note down any implications for teachers using literature in the language classroom.

Example 1: From a university study

In 'Cultural Knowledge and Reading' by M. S. Steffensen and C. Joag-Dev (Alderson and Urquhart, 1984, p. 53) a study conducted at the University of Wisconsin is described. The study examined the way in which even highly proficient readers of English process texts when reading. Subjects from India and the United States were asked to recall two parallel texts describing Indian and American weddings. The information they recalled was then analysed for the amount recalled and the types of errors made, in order to ascertain whether cultural background made a difference.

From this analysis it was concluded that reading comprehension is a function of cultural background knowledge. If readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer, they easily understand what is said in the text and also make the necessary inferences about what is implicit, rather than stated. By schemata was meant the abstract cognitive structures which incorporate generalised knowledge about objects and events. For example, the schemata concerning a wedding might include knowledge about the roles of bride and groom and other family members, what clothing is traditionally worn, who is invited, where the wedding is held, what rituals form part of the ceremony and so on. Obviously, these schemata will differ cross-culturally.

Example 2: From two book reviews

The following are two different opinions of Mrs Ramsay, a character in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf (published May 1927). The novel was reviewed in July 1927 by Conrad Aiken, an American novelist and poet (quoted in Majumdar and McLaurin). In his review Aiken admired Woolf's bold experimental technique, but he described her novels as having an 'odd and delicious air of parochialism, as of some small village-world, as bright and vivid and perfect in its tininess as a miniature: a small complete world which time has somehow missed'. He then went on to describe all Virginia Woolf's female characters, including Mrs Ramsay, as '... the creatures of seclusion, the creatures of shelter; they are exquisite beings, so perfectly and elaborately adapted to their environment that they have taken on something of the roundness and perfection of works of art'.

In 1975 Barbara Bellow Watson, a feminist literary critic, said this of Mrs Ramsay: 'Because Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is a domestic,

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nurturing woman, her figure may not be immediately recognized as the powerful feminist statement it is.' (quoted in M. Evans, 1982, p. 405).

Task 11

What different views of Mrs Ramsay are being expressed by the two reviewers? Can you suggest any reasons for this? Do you think this has any implications for using literature with the language learner?

In both of the examples above, it was implied that the meaning of a text can never be fixed or frozen, but that different readers of a text make sense of it in their own way. As Selden (1989, p. 79) puts it, readers can be free to enter a text from any direction, but there is no correct route. Below are a few factors which may be important in influencing, or even determining, the interpretation that readers make of a literary text:⁴

- the historical period in which the reader is living;
- the class/social position of the reader;
- the reader's religious beliefs.

Task 12 

- a) What other factors could you add to this list?
- b) Now decide which of the factors listed above, and the ones you may have added, might be the most important in influencing the interpretation that your own students might make of a literary text. Why?

Task 13 

We have just suggested that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed. But this view can be problematic for some teachers and students. Look at these possible objections to the suggestion that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed. Think about your own response to the objections.

- A. It is all very well to argue that the meaning of a literary text can never be fixed, but try telling that to my students! They insist that there is one way of understanding a text, and that I must know what it is. My refusal to provide this interpretation is seen as mean and wilful. I actually think my students have a point, since in their exams they are expected to come up with one particular interpretation and I doubt if variations on this would be acceptable.

Can you identify with the teacher's objections above? Can you think of any ways of overcoming the problems she describes?