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# The Value of Literature in Second Language Acquisition

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This paper presents a review of the research related to the teaching of English literature to students whose first language is one other than English. In order to provide a framework in terms of current theory in the area of teaching literature, the role of literature in first language programs is discussed followed by the role of literature in second language programs. The latter is further investigated within the context of the research concerning reading literary texts, writing about literature, and responding orally to literature.

## Literature in First Language Programs

While literature and composition are generally taught separately, this tradition is not long-standing. English literature was not studied as a distinct subject until the mid-nineteenth century (Horner, 1983). In the eighteenth century, the purpose of English studies was to unite the teaching of classical rhetoric with an understanding of literary culture (Scott, 1980). However, in the nineteenth century, literature became more concerned with the study of interpretive reading, while rhetoric became almost entirely concerned with form and correctness (Corbett, 1983; Horner, 1983).

The reasons for this fragmentation were both socioeconomic and pedagogical (Connors, 1985). Since, in the nineteenth century, previ-

ously elite college education was offered to greater numbers of people from various socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical areas, the desire to “set standards of propriety in language” grew (Connors, 1985, p.65); consequently, grammatical instruction became part of the college curriculum. Faced with large writing classes, nineteenth century English professors were forced to concentrate on the correction of mechanical errors in student papers rather than responding to student papers as genuine communication.

By the twentieth century, although some universities still offered rhetoric as a scholarly subject (often in philosophy departments) many literature professors no longer considered rhetoric a scholarly discipline and thus limited the study of literature to interpretive and evaluative analysis of poetry, drama, and fiction (Connors, 1985). As a result, graduate students and part-time faculty began teaching composition courses which focussed on expository and technical writing; these courses emphasized the avoidance of error as the goal of writing (Connors, 1985; Corbett, 1983; Horner, 1983).

Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, many language educators have advocated moving away from this emphasis on form and correctness to viewing writing as a process rather than a product (Connor, 1987; Raimes, 1983; Santos, 1988). As Connor (1987) states, “the past decade has witnessed a major paradigm shift in composition theory and research: the emphasis has moved from the product to the process of writing” (p.677). In addition, educators question the role of critical theory in the study of literature (Purves, 1979; Rosenblatt, 1938) and urge reintegration of the study of composition with the study of literature (Miller, 1983; Rubenstein, 1967).

## **Literature in Second Language Programs**

Although literature has often formed a basis for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, contemporary academic ESL instruction focuses on meeting the academic and occupational needs of students. As a result of this emphasis, linguists such as Topping (1968) have argued that literature should be excluded from the ESL curriculum. There are three common arguments against using literature in ESL classrooms. First, because of its structural complexity, its unique use of language, and lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules, literature does little to contribute to an understanding of the grammar of the language. Second, the study of literature does not contribute to students' practical goals of attaining linguistic proficiency. Finally, the particular cultural perspectives reflected in literature are conceptually difficult for students (McKay, 1982).

In contrast, recent research reveals a renewed interest in literature as instructors seek resources that will take students beyond an elementary level of language instruction to a level that will enable them to function more effectively in the target culture (Oster, 1985; Povey, 1967, 1972, 1979, 1984; Spack, 1985; Widdowson, 1975, 1982, 1983). Although it can be argued that students would benefit more by studying texts from their own disciplines than by studying literature, it may also be argued that students who study science and technology suffer from prolonged exposure to too much technical writing which is "notorious for its clumsiness and stylistic infelicity" (Marckwardt, 1978, p.18). Numerous instructors now believe that the study of literature which promotes "seeing feelingly on the one hand, and skeptically, rationally, on the other" (Oster, 1985, p.75) should be included in the ESL curriculum since students are "intellectually and emotionally, if not linguis-

tically and culturally,” ready to examine literary works (Spack, 1985, p. 704). Some educators have published literary anthologies for ESL students (McKay and Petitt, 1984; Mullen, 1984; Povey, 1984).

According to Povey (1967), the linguistic difficulty of literature has been overstated. In fact, literature can expand all language skills: “literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax” (Povey, 1972, p.187). Since literature reflects national culture, Sage (1987, 1993) argues that a major value of literature is its cultural content. Marckwardt (1978) similarly states that since literature expresses both cultural and human values, its study can promote communication, understanding, and greater tolerance of cultural differences.

In using English literature with Puerto Rican students, Marshall (1979) found that her own appreciation of the text was clarified and her respect for the students’ cultural background enhanced as she helped students overcome culturally specific textual details. Hence, literature helped promote a greater tolerance of cultural differences for both teacher and students. Frye (1964) stresses this benefit of studying literature:

So you may ask what is the use of studying the world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good. One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance. (p.77)

Widdowson (1975) indicates that although literary language does not depend on conventional grammar for its meaning, literature models

a wider range of communicative strategies than any other ESL teaching component. As Hymes (1972) points out, there are two levels of linguistic knowledge: usage and use. According to this definition, usage involves a knowledge of linguistic rules, whereas use entails knowing how to use these rules for effective communication. Since some literature presents language in discourse where setting and relationships are defined, and illustrates a particular dialect or register embedded within a social context, it is effective in developing an awareness of language use (Widdowson, 1975).

Furthermore, Widdowson (1982) scorns those who eliminate literature from the ESL classroom, yet utilize textbook fiction to display language usage: "Textbooks are full of fiction, Mr and Mrs Brown, son David, daughter Mary pursuing the dreary round of their diurnal life" (p.205). He explains that students do not view such texts as meaningful use of language. He suggests that literature should be viewed as discourse and the study of literature as "an inquiry into the way a language is used to express a reality other than that expressed by conventional means" (p.80). Since the students' goal is to learn how the host language is used for communication, the study of literature can develop "a sharper awareness of the communicative resources of the language being learned" (Widdowson, 1975, p.83).

Because literature usually implies as much as it states, the study of literature demands that students develop their abilities to interpret discourse:

By leaving some things unexplained, imaginative literature differs rather consistently from discursive prose. The essayist characteristically wants to supply as much detail as possible so that his meanings are direct and clear.

But the writer of literature leaves much for the reader to conjecture and imagine. (Irmscher, 1975, p.108)

These interpretive skills are valuable to ESL students because they can be applied to “a range of language uses, both literary and nonliterary which they encounter inside and outside the learning situation” (Widdowson, 1975, p.84).

Also, it has been argued that reading for interest and pleasure, where students focus on the writer’s message, contributes to the development of writing ability (Krashen, 1984). Salvatori’s (1983) research on the correlations between reading and writing patterns suggests that her students’ improved ability to manipulate syntactic structures was the result of their “increased ability to engage in, and to be reflexive about, the reading of highly complex texts” (p.659). According to Rubinstein (1967), the writing process can facilitate the reading process since writing is “not only a record of understanding, but an act of understanding” (p.24). Hence, in ESL classrooms, the activity of composing, once artificially separated from the activity of reading, can justifiably be taught in conjunction with the teaching of literature (Spack, 1985).

### **Reading Literary Texts**

In recent years, a radical change in thinking about response to literature has taken place. In the early twentieth century, literary scholars assumed that there was only one correct way to read a literary text (Purves, 1979). However, Rosenblatt (1938) explored the interactive relationship between a reader and a text. She suggests that reading is an interactive process in which both the reader and the text

contribute to meaning. That is, readers take an active role, bringing to bear personal views, experience with language and with culture, and expectations of reading to construct meaning and analyze ideas.

Even so, not until approximately thirty years later did researchers and theorists recognize Rosenblatt's (1938) subjective perspective: that individual responses to literary works could be as valid as formal, authoritative techniques of literary interpretation (Bleich, 1980). Furthermore, sharing interpretations facilitates critical response which involves understanding, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating in order to respond to a text on literal, inferential and evaluative levels. Such cognitive skills are facilitated by the discussion and exchange of interpretations; this is particularly important for ESL students who may feel that a text is too difficult for them (Cunliffe and Begin, 1988). Widdowson (1978) regards teaching "not as a reaction to a text but as interaction between writer and reader mediated through the text" (p. 74). This interaction occurs on both the linguistic and the conceptual levels and necessitates the ability to interact with a text by decoding the language and comprehending the concepts presented.

The interaction of reader and text is the basic tenet of schema theory (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Reading is thus viewed as a communicative activity that can be compared with conversation since both processes involve the interaction of one participant who has information to give, and another who receives that information. Consequently, schema theorists advocate reader-centred pedagogy and focus on an interactive processes orientation to the complex, cognitive process of reading (Fagan, 1987). Recognition of the importance of schemata is certainly not new: "Kant claimed as long ago as 1781, new information, new concepts, new ideas can have meaning only when they can be related to something the individual already knows" (Carrell and



Eisterhold, 1983, p.553). Even so, the study of second language reading comprehension has traditionally emphasized the language to be comprehended rather than the reader's experiential knowledge.

Numerous studies investigating ESL reading comprehension have been conducted (Block, 1986; Carrell, 1985, 1987; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Fagan, 1992, 1987; Mosenthal, 1984; Perkins, 1983). Such studies indicate that four skills are necessary for inferencing and semantic constructivity: prior knowledge, logical skills, systematic integration, and active processing. Thus, it may be concluded that ESL educators must recognize the importance of the reader's contribution to the reading process:

A fundamental assumption of schema-theoretic approaches to language comprehension is that spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning. Rather, a text only provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct the intended meaning from their own, previously acquired knowledge. (Perkins, 1983, p.20)

Block's (1986) findings regarding the comprehension strategies of second language readers indicate that ESL students do not appear to use comprehension strategies which are different from those of native English speakers. As a result, she questions research which suggests that reading ability in a second language is largely a function of second language proficiency. That is, she questions the view that language skill development is linear, moving from lower level letter and word level skills to high level, cognitive skills. Since her study suggests that the development of comprehension strategies does not appear to depend

on language specific features, Block (1986) argues that high level strategies developed in the first language can be transferred to the second language and can operate alongside lower processing strategies. She concludes, “readers of the second language seem to bring with them the knowledge of the reading process and of approaches to task and then apply these to specific language features in the text” (p.485).

The classroom implications of such research are that instructors should examine what their students can already do before deciding to eliminate literature from the ESL curriculum. The mechanical ability to recognize written symbols is merely one aspect of the process of reading; to decode a written message, good readers must apply interpretive skills. As Sage (1987) indicates, the benefits of studying literature clearly make it appropriate reading matter for ESL students. Literature can be taught as “a way of exploring understanding, and reflecting on the strategies by which readers...generate meanings in the act of reading” (Salvatori, 1983, p.659).

In addition to interpretive skills, another important factor to consider in teaching reading comprehension of literary texts is that of teaching text structure. As Carrell (1985) reports, research has shown that teaching various aspects of text structure can facilitate ESL reading. Two major genre types are used to define texts: narrative and exposition. Narrative is generally equated with story grammars or story schema and differs from exposition in that it is not concerned with representing static events but with events that occur over time (Fagan, 1987).

Carrell’s (1985) study regarding the teaching of text structure to facilitate reading demonstrates that when story grammar (a set of hierarchical rules for providing a description of story in terms of its key parts) is used to guide comprehension and recall, both are facilitated.

Other empirical studies show the valuable effect of teaching text structure (Carrell, 1987; Geva, 1983; Mosenthal, 1984). Studies involving training on discourse types all show that reading comprehension can be significantly improved by teaching text structure. Even so, as Carrell (1985) explains, "teaching the prototypical patterns of different texts would be inappropriate unless such instruction occurs in conjunction with helping students, in a number of ways, to acquire meaning from text" (p.742).

In her more recent study, Carrell (1987) examines the effects on ESL reading comprehension of both culture-specific content schemata and formal schemata, as well as potential interaction between them. She defines content schemata as the background knowledge a reader brings to a text, "knowledge relative to the content domain of the text," whereas formal schema is "knowledge relative to the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of text" (p.461). The overall finding of this study is that both content and form are of primary importance; each plays a significant, but different, role in reading comprehension. She suggests that in the ESL reading classroom, content is of primary importance: "when either form or content is unfamiliar, unfamiliar content poses more difficulties than unfamiliar form" (p.476). Gatbonton and Tucker (1971) also stress the importance of providing background information and previewing content to maximize comprehension of literary texts. Similarly, Sage (1987) emphasizes preparing students for difficult vocabulary or for culturally specific details which may limit their ability to comprehend a text.

Since literature reflects some aspects of the human and social values of a particular culture, reading literature exposes ESL students to unfamiliar cultural content. However, as McKay (1982) indicates, "an examination of a foreign culture through literature may increase

their understanding of that culture” (p.531). Literary texts dealing with relevant themes with which students can identify facilitate their understanding of an unfamiliar culture, but as McKay (1982) additionally states, “a text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or a cultural level will have few benefits” (p.531). Hence, themes such as personal growth and development presented in short stories or novellas, where the text is relatively short and the number of characters is relatively small, are recommended for ESL classrooms (McKay, 1982; Sage, 1987; Spack, 1985).

Early (1960) describes growth in literary appreciation as moving through three stages: “unconscious delight,” “self conscious appreciation,” and “conscious delight.” The first stage of “unconscious delight” experienced by children listening to stories moves into a stage of “self conscious appreciation” as students become aware of the forms and conventions of literature. When reading, students first recognize the techniques they have studied, then begin to understand and analyze the effect the author’s technique has on the work. Mature readers are often able to experience “conscious delight” during reading by being aware of aspects of style and form while enjoying the story, poem or play. Thus, a goal of reading instruction is to encourage students to move through these three stages to develop informed critical response to literary texts (Cunliffe, 1992).

### **Writing about Literature**

In developing an informed response to literature, students must recognize the interrelationship between reading and writing since the basis of writing about literature is close, careful readings of a text. According to Petrosky (1982), “in order to help students understand the

text they read and their response, we need to ask them to write about the text they read” (p.20). He suggests that students “are asked to write, first, what they perceive in the text, and then how they feel about what they see, and finally what associations — thoughts and feelings — inform and follow their perceptions” (p.25). Salvatori (1983) similarly believes that literature should be taught as “a way of exploring, understanding, and reflecting on the strategies by which readers...generate meanings in the act of reading” (p.659). Petrosky (1982) further states that writing about reading is one of the best ways to get students to “unravel their transactions so that we can see how they understand” (p.24). Sage (1987) links research on response to literature, recent composition research, and recent reading research as all these processes focus on constructing meaning from both text and background knowledge. Consequently, he advocates teaching reading in conjunction with teaching writing through the study of literature.

“Recent composition research emphasizes that writing is a complex process involving more than grammatical instruction and formula writing. Composing is a recursive series of complex intellectual and cognitive processes in which a writer explores, researches and develops a topic for a real purpose and audience (Connor, 1990; Hamp-Lyons, 1992; Liebman-Kleine, 1986; Raimes, 1983 Santos, 1988). Thus, to incorporate current research in second language education, and to find a framework for activities which best develop fluency and accuracy, viewing writing as a process rather than a product is an integral consideration (Cunliffe and Begin, 1988)” (Cunliffe, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Cunliffe, B. “Writing Instruction in Second Language Classrooms,” *Studies in Culture No. 5*, Hokkai Gakuen University, October 1995, for a full discussion of the process approach to writing.

## Oral Response to Literature

Spack (1985) indicates that a new approach to understanding literature is necessary to explore and discover meaning. She states, “today, it is acceptable, even preferable, to teach literature as an exploration of meaning. We can experience literature along with our students and learn from our own writing and discussion of what we have read” (p. 720). Furthermore, as Widdowson (1985) points out:

The most common assumption appears to be that literature teaching is concerned exclusively with study so that students are expected to make critical observations about literary works, on the supposition that they have already learned how to read them. Not surprisingly, students find this difficult to do. (p.185)

It is perhaps by adopting current language educators’ views of responding to literature that some common difficulties experienced by ESL students can be understood and addressed. For example, classroom discussions and presentations promote understanding and facilitate “the exploration of meaning” of a text (Spack, 1985, p.720). In the ESL classroom, oral response to literature has often been restricted to students answering the instructor’s questions. According to Widdowson (1985), however, this approach is an ineffective way to involve students in their learning. Rather, instructors should promote lively group or class discussion which encourages students’ self-expressions in order to investigate meaning.

In his discussion of teaching literature, Applebee (1974) indicates that the instructor’s task is not simply to teach a body of knowledge,

but to act as a facilitator and “gradually to elaborate the linguistic and intellectual repertoire of our students, a process that is more fluid than linear” (p.255). In order to build students’ confidence as well as to encourage student participation, it is also the instructor’s responsibility to foster a low affective filter — that is, classrooms which “promote low anxiety among students, that keep students off the defensive” (Krashen, 1985, p.32). Thus, educators (Applebee, 1974; McKay, 1982; Sage, 1987; Spack, 1985) recognize that by sharing interpretations in a stimulating, nonthreatening environment, students come to understand how meaning can be interpreted. Activities such as group or class discussions and student presentations should consequently be an integral component so that participants gain insights into literary texts through the exchange of ideas involved in responding orally to literature.

Although the controversy concerning how, when and why literature should be used in second language classrooms is unresolved, many authorities (McKay, 1982; Sage, 1987; Spack, 1985; Widdowson, 1975, 1982, 1983) recognize the value of literature in developing language proficiency. As Sage (1987) comments, the debate has “attracted some of the best minds. These teachers find the use of literature in language teaching an interesting and worthy concern” (p.2). Their concern is shared by this researcher who has found that the inclusion of literature in ESL reading courses provides stimulating, challenging, interactive material often sadly lacking in prescribed reading texts.

Thus, it is recommended that students should be exposed to literature by reading and responding to simple short stories and poems at lower levels in order to introduce literary terminology and thus prepare them for analysis of more difficult texts as they advance through the program. Such an incremental exposure to literature would gradually

ease the transition from reading exposition to reading literature and develop students' vocabulary, critical analysis skills and cultural understanding. However, despite the advantages of including literature in second language classes, it must be stressed that the instructor's role as facilitator as well as his/her empathy with and understanding of second language learners is crucial in developing their confidence to respond to literary texts. Kidd's (1973) position that students must have a sense of well-being before they will "dare the pain and discomfort that...always accompanies any learning" (p.120) must be an instructor's primary concern if students are to benefit from the inclusion of literature in their reading courses.

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