EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH ON IMPLEMENTING LITERATURE TO TEACHING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence in the use of literature in language teaching has been accompanied by an increasing number of research articles in this area. Research (in a number of second languages) has looked at the type of interactions and the type of language that arise from classroom discussions about literature, as well as at the views of teachers and learners. Importantly, the reactions that learners have to incorporating literature in their language lessons are linked to the type of approach and type of task that are used in the classroom. The paper surveys the existing research, as well as evidence from practitioners about approaches that are used and the range of works and authors that are taught.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been the topic of a state-of-the-art paper in Language Teaching twice before, though the angle taken in each case was different. In 1988, Lott's survey, entitled Language and literature, was concerned mainly with examining literary language and the way linguistic thought was influencing (or not) literary criticism within the New Critics and structuralism. There was a short section on teaching materials, divided between materials for mother-tongue readers and materials for second language (L2) learners. Lott makes the point that in the latter type of material, the approach is normally through the topic, 'teaching becomes group guidance', and goes on to claim that 'the text itself … is generally treated in a rather perfunctory way, and its distinctive nature as literature, and as a display of language put to special uses, seems often to be lost sight of' (Lott 1988: 9). In the section 'The way ahead', Lott discusses research as well – but in his case the search is on for an 'extended, practical methodology for investigating language as it is used in literature' and the research is 'aimed at producing an operational model for the analysis of style' (ibid.). In contrast, Gilroy & Parkinson's (2016) survey was entitled Teaching literature in a foreign language. It looked at developments in literary theory, reader response, and communicative language teaching, and then went on to examine materials for learners and teachers, focusing

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mainly on books (both specialist collections and general coursebooks) and to a large extent excluding articles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Both papers were – as state-of-the-art papers should be – very much of their period, reflecting the concerns of linguists and teachers at the time. But a number of points are noteworthy, and interestingly these are points concerning division and exclusion. The first important point is that neither paper looks at empirical research into literature in language teaching. It is true that there was far less research then than there is now (see also Carter 2007), but whatever research there was then is not always accorded a place.

Secondly, both papers focus very much on English, with only a few references to other languages, reflecting the predominance of English as the main global foreign language, and the division between it and other foreign languages. Having said that, it is also important to note other divisions in this area. Kramsch & Kramsch (2000) point out that, in general, foreign language teaching in the US has tended to remain enclosed within language boundaries, with separate professional organisations for different languages. Also in the US there is at university level the division between language teaching and learning and literature in general, a phenomenon which Kramsch & Nolden (1994: 28) call 'the institutionalized dichotomy between literary studies and language training', as well as the division between the focus on language learning in the initial stages of an undergraduate degree, and literature learning in the later years of study (e.g. Lyman-Hager 2000; Murti 2016). Burnett & Fonder-Solano (2002), for example, have documented the misunderstandings between literature teachers and language teachers, including incidents of actual hostility (see also Byrnes & Kord 2002; Fonder-Solano & Burnett 2004).

There is some tentative agreement that these divisions are beginning to be bridged. I have previously suggested (Paran 2006b) that in EFL, at last, there has been a move towards integrating language and literature, and Carter (2007: 10) suggests that at least some of the differences have begun eroding, and goes on to say that 'literature has begun to assume a higher profile in contexts of second language acquisition, a dimension absent from the research radar in 1986'. The present paper, as its title suggests, continues this trend, and moves the discussion from the definition of literature, from the language of literature, and from a focus on textbooks, to a focus on the emerging research in this area. It focuses on the research done in recent years on reading, learning, and teaching literature in a variety of foreign languages. The focus will be on the research that has appeared since Gilroy & Parkinson's (2016) paper, although there are also references to previous papers as well, whenever relevant.

However, there is still an obvious need to delimit the area of enquiry that this paper will deal with. Figure 1 presents the relationship between

literature and language learning as the intersection of two axes. The horizontal axis refers to the extent to which any programme or lesson focuses on literature or on literary competence and its development.

Thus, on the left hand side of this axis, where the learners are learning a second or a foreign language, there is little wish on the part of teachers to teach language per se; even where there is an engagement with language, this engagement serves a literary aim (e.g. understanding the linguistic choices made by the writer). The vertical axis represents the extent of engagement with language learning: at one end we have a focus on language learning, where the teacher focuses explicitly on language learning and activities are specifically designed to further this aim. At the other end of the axis, we have classes or courses where there is no explicit aim on language learning at all.
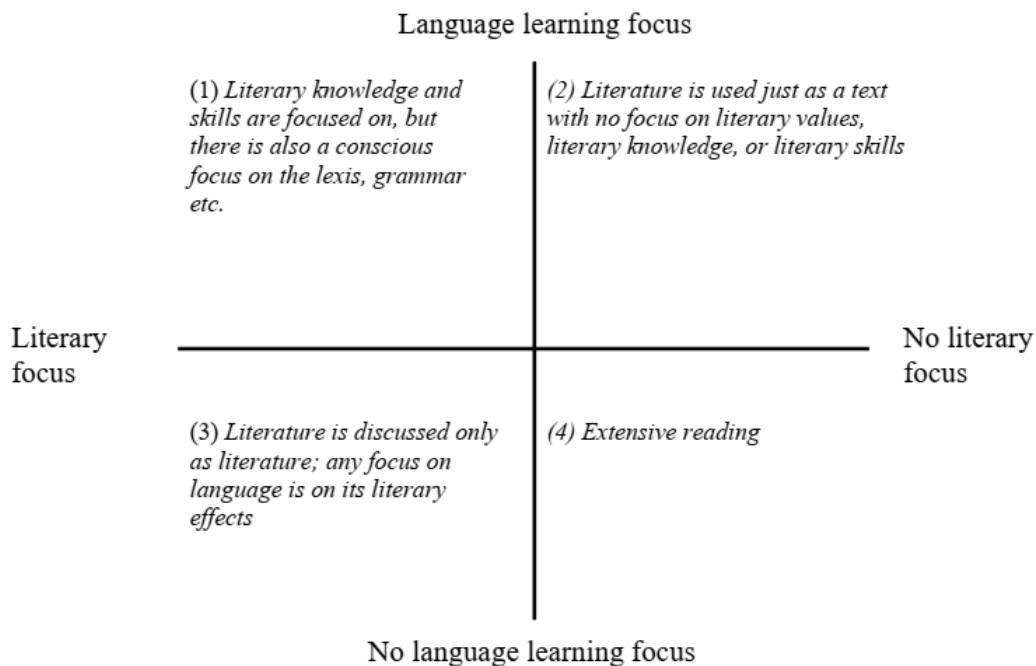
Language learning focus

(1) *Literary knowledge and skills are focused on, but there is also a conscious focus on the lexis, grammar etc.*

(2) *Literature is used just as a text with no focus on literary values, literary knowledge, or literary skills*

Literary focus

No literary focus

(3) *Literature is discussed only as literature; any focus on language is on its literary effects*

(4) *Extensive reading*

No language learning focus

Figure 1. The intersection of literature and language teaching

The intersection of these two axes results, as Figure 1 shows, in four quadrants. Quadrant 1 represents a situation where both areas are focused on. Quadrant 2 shows a situation where no distinction is being made between what McRae (1991/2008) calls representational texts and referential texts, and representational texts are used in the classroom or in research settings without any focus on their literary qualities. Quadrant 3 exemplifies a situation where literature is discussed only as literature, and no overt focus is paid to language development: it is assumed that the

learner has reached the linguistic level needed to discuss literature in the foreign language. This is the situation in many university courses around the world, and is indeed part of the deep divide discussed above. Finally, the fourth quadrant exemplifies extensive reading, where there is no focus on literary qualities of what is being read (and indeed, the material being read may well be non-fiction) and where, in its purest form, there is no language learning work either. In such cases there is often no reference at all to what is being read, and indeed, the reference may be to 'reading' or to 'books' rather than 'literature'. In between there is a whole gamut of approaches in which the literature–reading balance is calibrated differently. Figure 1 is, of course, a simplification: there are other important elements that can enter into a reciprocal relationship with literature in the language classroom. One, for example, is reading and the study of reading comprehension. The other is the issue of culture, cultural knowledge, and intercultural competence. A true picture of the situation would most likely resemble a web, with a large number of possible permutations of the interactions between the strands. In this paper, however, I will not refer to these areas, and my focus will be mainly on the areas between the two extremes I have described above, i.e. approaches where the focus is both on language and on literature, though with differing weight given to each in different situations and contexts.

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

The shifting relationship between language learning and literature is still the subject of a great deal of debate. In a study looking at the way in which published articles in the Modern Language Journal have dealt with these issues, Kramsch & Kramsch (2000) illustrate the movement from literature as part of an elitist study of foreign languages at the beginning of the 20th century to a view of literature as an authentic source of language at the end of the century. Hall (2005), in a similar examination of the papers published in the ELT Journal, discerns a move from a suspicious attitude towards literature in the middle of the 20th century, through attempts to incorporate it in communicative language teaching through humanistic techniques, reader response, and stylistics, highlighting a special ELT Journal issue in 1990 which focused on the shift from traditional methodologies to newer approaches. He then identifies the rise of a view which sees literature 'as potentially playing a role in facilitating the learner's access to this Englishusing culture' (Hall 2005: 55).

One arena where the discussion has raged for some time is the use of literature in EAP courses in the USA. Belcher & Hirvela (2000), Hirvela (2001a) and Vandrick (2003) provide an overview of the area, linking the controversy to debates in L1 teaching of writing in the US. Belcher & Hirvela (2000) show how, initially, composition and literature tended to be taught

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by the same people at the time when the two areas emerged as subjects worthy of academic study, and the two subjects have diverged and converged over the years. In the L2 context, Belcher & Hirvela (2000) trace the rise of ESP and the way in which the focus among L2 composition teachers on discourse communities and the language needed to participate in them, meant that literature and literary language were seen as unsuitable for inclusion in L2 teaching. However, they suggest that reading and writing only information-based texts may in fact prevent students from developing the 'array of rhetorical and linguistic resources' (Belcher & Hirvela 2000: 29) that they need for their writing. Vandrick (2003) discusses the objections to the use of literature, such as the difficulties it might present, the lack of relevance of literature as preparation for academic writing genres, and the lack of motivation.

An important discussion of the arguments for and against using literature in the L2 classroom is Edmondson (1997), whose overall position is that literature has nothing special to offer language teaching. Although the observations he makes at the beginning of his paper are drawn from a variety of contexts, the picture that Edmondson (1997) draws is one in which learners are exposed to the same type of literature teaching in L1 and L2, expecting a teacher centred approach in which the teacher's interpretation is all that counts, and overall not caring much for literature. He then presents a number of arguments either against the use of literature, or suggesting that literature does not have any advantage over other texts. Overall, he suggests that other curriculum subjects probably provide a better insight into culture than literature does; that literary elements and references in the language are not more important than other cultural references; that literature is not more motivating than other texts, and can sometimes be extremely demotivating, depending on the way the text is used; that there is no point examining at isolated cases of successful lessons (what he calls the 'Look at this!' argument); and that literature does not activate cognitive mechanisms in any way that is different from other texts.

In Paran (2006b) I pointed out what I believe is the main fallacy of Edmondson's position and why it is important to debate these issues: namely, his view of language learning as focusing on language only, presenting what I call an isolationist position, whereby language learning is concerned with acquiring competence in the L2 and nothing more. Edmondson's view of the language learner chimes in with this, and is implicit in his phraseology: he talks about 'the business of language learning' (p. 42) and 'the business of achieving proficiency or general competence in an L2' (p. 45); the learners are 'educational consumers' and specific learners are 'the products of at least eight years school learning' (p. 43). This is similar to the trend that Shanahan (1997) identifies in FL teaching in the US, which he claims is a utilitarian business, which employs what he

calls a 'reductively utilitarian logic' (1997: 165), where teaching a FL is justified mainly through its contribution to the learners' careers.

This type of argumentation seems to be taking the learner as a person out of the equation: the focus is on the text, and on the learner as a language learning machine. In such a context, it may indeed be true that literary texts do not carry inherent characteristics making them suitable for language learning. The point is that literary texts are suitable because language is learned by human beings, and the interest and love of literature for its various qualities is a human characteristic, a common denominator in a way in which an interest in 'history, geography, the economics or the architecture of other countries' (Edmondson 1997:46) is not. If we take as our starting point an understanding of the role of literature in daily life, the way in which narratives function in learning, the role of literature and narratives in education, and the language-literature link– all these are important in understanding that literature may have a place in L2 teaching more than the subjects mentioned by Edmondson in the quote above, or subjects such as 'philosophy, art, contemporary political issues, or other subjects on the humanist agenda' (Horowitz 1990:162). Language learning is not only about language – it is about learning as well; it is not only about training, but also about education. As Bredella points out 'literary texts in the foreign language classroom are not only important for foreign language learning, but also provide it with significant educational goals' (Bredella 2000a: 380; see also Widdowson 2002: 77–85 for a discussion of the educational relevance of poetry). Shanahan (1997) presents an integrated view of this area, stressing that 'our fundamental goal as language professionals is to expand and enrich the lives of our students and the society in which they live' (Shanahan 1997: 171), and going on to explore the importance of the affective element of language learning and the importance of symbolic expression.

More recent theorizing has shifted away from a limited, isolating perspective in which the different areas of language learning are compartmentalized and teaching has a utilitarian, market-economy driven purpose, to more holistic perspectives which takes different aspects of the learner and the context of learning into account, looking at the whole person and the whole culture, in which literature is part of developing the whole person, and in which affective development and affective factors are taken into account.

Kern & Schultz (2005) view literature in a foreign language within a re-framing and redefining of literacy. They explore parallels between new concepts of literacy and 'the work of the literary specialist' (2005: 383), suggesting that the multiple-layered reading of texts characteristic of literary readings can, within a larger literacy framework, be of use for the teaching of this type of reading.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered the research into the use of literature in L2 settings. I have demonstrated that principled evidence is emerging that is showing the benefits of using literature, and we are now in a better position to refute the claims made, for example by Edmondson (1997). There are, of course, still various points which still need to be addressed. It goes without saying that more research is needed in all of the areas discussed in this paper. Although I have made a case in support of practitioner evidence, we still need more empirical studies into what happens in literature and language classrooms, along the lines of the papers discussed in section 3, as well as what happens when individuals read literature in their L2, along the lines of the investigation described by Hanauer (2001). We also need more systematic evaluation of courses, and systematic enquiries into the views of the learners. We also need to investigate issues of testing in the language and literature classroom (Paran, forthcoming). On a more general level, there is a sense in which more recent views of literature as discourse have not yet impacted on the L2 classroom, and this impact will also need to be researched (see Hall 2005 for an in-depth exposition of this area, as well as for an extensive discussion of possible research projects). Other areas were not discussed in this paper at all: the role of literature in a foreign language in supporting inter-cultural competence (for an overview see Bredella 2000b), or the role of creative writing in L2 learning (see for example, Ensslin 2006; Spiro, forthcoming). An overview that would encompass those would go a long way towards transforming the possibly simplistic Figure 1 in this survey to a more extensive model of the ways in which literature can be used in L2 learning and teaching.

Possibly the most important point to observe – and it is important because this is not immediately apparent – is that most of the detailed empirical studies discussed in this paper were conducted almost entirely in university settings. This bias towards university teaching is probably an artefact of the difficulties that researchers are facing in researching secondary school settings: academics will normally have better access to university students than to secondary schools; research in secondary schools may often require parental consent. School settings are represented in this paper mainly through practitioner evidence. We thus need two types of information. One is survey research that will demonstrate the extent of the use of literature in the L2 classroom in primary and secondary school settings. We then need is research into the way literature is taught in these setting, how it is perceived by teachers and received by students, how successful it is in promoting language proficiency. These school settings, are, after all, the locus of most language learning in the world, and there are important aspects of this learning (and teaching) that are still unexplored.

It is clear that literature does have something very special to offer to language learning. As Hanauer (1997) has argued, it combines attention to meaning with attention to form. We have evidence that it is motivating and engaging, and, in the cases where learners show resistance and dislike of literature, we understand why it is the case. We understand its value for the learner, and we are also beginning to understand the importance of the learning task that is provided by the teacher for the success of language learning in this context and for the success of literary understanding as well. Clearly, providing adequate direction and clear scaffolding is vital. This scaffolding may be provided by a textbook or a reader, but more often than not, it is provided by the teacher, who is important in two ways. One is the way in which the task is set up; the second is the way in which a teacher can react to the way a discussion is going, provide scaffolding as and when it is needed. Overall, we are also beginning to understand the role of the teacher in this area, providing us with the beginnings of an understanding of how to go about training teachers who will be competent and confident in confronting the issues involved in using literature in the language classroom.

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