

## Get lit up: literature as a teacher's best friend

Literature. Quite a divisive word, that. Throw it through an open window into a room full of language teachers and most will dive behind furniture, fingers in their ears and looks of horror on their faces.



A few, possibly, will greet its arrival amongst them with a squeak of delight and start playing with it like a favourite pet.

A bit of an exaggeration? Not really. Most teachers of English as a foreign language will identify fairly readily with one group or the other, with those who would welcome the chance to use literature in the classroom and those who wouldn't even think about it.

Why not use literature?

'You need to be an expert'  
There are many reasons why teachers don't feel comfortable with literature in the language classroom. Perhaps they are still in the recovery stage themselves, with painful memories of literature classes as a curriculum subject at school. Unsuitable and unhelpful exposure to the weighty tomes of long dead writers has left them numb to the possible charms of the art. It might be that they don't read books themselves, gain no pleasure from them, and so don't see why they should take the burden into class. Others might perceive a wide gulf between the teaching of a language and the study of the literature of that language, and why would they not? Many universities maintain sturdy defences between the study of a language and the study of its literature: two different departments; two different mind sets. Others, possibly the largest group, might think literature has a place in the language classroom but that it's not for them. After all, dealing with

literature requires the hand of an expert, doesn't it? And, let's face facts, it is a bit elitist, this literature thing, isn't it?

'It must be "proper" literature'  
A reverse distinction can sometimes be seen in some of the many of the reading groups which have been blossoming all over the place in recent years, where people's love of books extends to a desire to meet regularly with others and share that love. In some groups, the readers seem to experience a certain feeling of discomfort at choosing non-canonical, non-classic texts to share to read. The elitism alluded to earlier can be seen dividing popular, or even modern literature from 'proper' literature (that is books by dead white men, with an occasional honorary woman allowed in) as if being found sharing, let alone enjoying a popular or, heaven forbid, lightweight book, was something of a minor sin; something to be ashamed of.

'It's too hard for the students'  
On the other hand, those who do welcome narrative and poetry into the classroom often do so with a passion, and it is this enthusiasm which drives them to want to share with their students. But even here hesitation is noted. Do they feel adequately equipped to share what they see as a precious jewel with their students? Aren't many of the books they feel passionate about too advanced for their students' language level anyway?

'There's not enough time!'  
However, the biggest cause of excluding literature from the language classroom, the over-riding factor which supposedly clinches the argument, is that there is no time in the school syllabus for such dalliings. Why, there is barely time to cover every page in the course book so why bring in extra work?

The argument for literature  
The point to make at this critical juncture is to make it clear that all the teachers who fall into the categories described above, and many others not mentioned here, have misunderstood what literature in the language classroom can be. The key point is that literature can be a very flexible tool for any language teacher:

- it requires no specialist training;
- it can be brief, contemporary and relevant;
- it can be used to enhance, supplement and complement the curriculum;
- it can aid students' speaking as well as reading skills,
- it can engage the class in aspects of critical thinking that text books rarely do and open minds onto the world;
- it can assist with specific language learning and it is an ideal tool for revision purposes.

Many teachers who have courageously taken the leap from being non-users to users of literature in the EFL classroom speak of the feeling of liberation it gives them, and the sense of creativity it transfers to the class.

Literature, they discover, gives them permission to enter other worlds and ideas and to explore them confidently.

Of course, this doesn't happen without a degree of preparation. A little will happen simply by opening up a book in class and reading to students, but not a lot. Even less will be achieved by sending the class away to read Chapter 3 over the weekend for homework. Nothing will be achieved by deciding to structurally analyse the book or its contents. What is required is a careful handling of the sometimes delicate interface between language and literature and to understand where the students fit into the creative reading cycle. What is needed is a way of raising students' expectations so that reading becomes a positive experience. What is indispensable is an understanding of where the narrative might lead the reader and, at the same time, to recognise that a narrative might take 30 different people to 30 different places, and be able to deal with that reality in class.

Thus, while we may not need any expert skills in literature per se, we will need to be fairly resourceful and imaginative teachers. Luckily there is a growing body of support out there, from engaging classroom resources to help from communities of experienced teachers, and from access to copyright free short stories and poetry to contact with authors and poets.

**By Fitch O'Connell**