

(Re)placing Literary Texts in the Intercultural Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

In the history of language teaching, literary texts have gradually been reduced to a source for linguistic learning, as an informative representation of cultural traits or even dismissed from the foreign language classroom. This paper aims to add reasons that justify considering literary texts a vital presence in the foreign language classroom. One general aim is to promote the study of foreign literature as enjoyable and (inter)culturally significant. The classroom is inevitably a culturally heterogeneous setting since its elements are already socialized subjects. Instead of its limiting role of supplying knowledge, the classroom ought to foster reading critically through a pedagogy of questioning the text, searching for and building textual meaning. Teaching literature in a foreign language should underline how literature offers new perspectives and how these views are directly relevant to the world we live in and the lives we lead.

Keywords: Literary texts, Intercultural learning, Foreign language classroom, Language-and-culture

1. Introduction

The place of literature in modern society is something that can no longer be taken for granted. Once upon a time its significance was unquestioned, whereas now, paradoxically, the significance has been eroded in proportion to the increasing accessibility of books. (Iser, 1993, p.197)

Recently, literary texts have been less favoured in Portuguese secondary school syllabuses, specifically in the case of English as a foreign language (EFL), which favour more *pragmatic* types of reading. Many students and teachers do not take for granted the need for literature any more. The reasons for the situation of literature as an “endangered species”, in Rosenblatt’s words, have been described by authors such as Kramsch and Kramsch (2000) (Note 1) or Durant (1997). The latter traces factors such as a general emphasis on media and cultural studies as well as critiques in first-language literature studies of the English literary canon as contributing to undermining the place of literature as a cultural component of EFL. (Note 2)

Furthermore, the emphasis on the use of different types of authentic material brought about by communicative language teaching has been reinforcing a study of language that considers this concept *–language–* as a mere functional skill. This standpoint disregards other significant dimensions of the concept as put forward in a key reference document such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) that describes in a comprehensive manner the competences necessary for communication, the related knowledge and skills and the situations and domains of communication.

2. FL as Language-and-Culture

The study of a foreign language-and-culture cannot be limited to the study of documents or text reading comprehension. What should be at issue is the development of competences that would enable learners to work out dysfunctions inherent to a relationship with foreignness and, in the process, discover aspects of their own identities which they had not explored previously. Especially, Zarate points out, their own condition as foreigners in the eyes of the *other* and the peculiarity of cultural practices that are taken for granted (Zarate, 1993, p.98).

It is my belief that in facilitating the reading of literary texts in English, teachers may welcome students to the world of books and engage them in a relationship with otherness. As Iser argues, it is the functional value of literature that has changed and this paper aims to add reasons that justify its vital presence in the foreign language classroom. Literature

emerges both as a subject of study in its own right and as a tool for intercultural learning. (Note 3) One general aim is to promote the study of foreign literature as enjoyable and (inter)culturally significant.

3. Literature Teaching in Practice

The issue is that at present in practice, generally speaking, literature courses continue to offer close literary study in which the canonical texts are studied according to the time period and social origin of their authors. Although most teachers of literature in Portugal would agree that one of the most important aims in teaching literature is to develop the ability to read and enjoy literature, in practice the central concern becomes how to teach and test systematized knowledge of the literary texts chosen for study. Moreover, according to Mello (1998, pp.95-96) when referring to the Portuguese reality, sometimes the teacher monopolises the access to the text in almost all aspects, i.e. semantically, culturally, mythically and symbolically, by informing or decoding. Furthermore, current literature teaching practice persists in viewing literary texts as *evidence* of a number of aspects: historical context, social conditions, biographical data and so forth. This attitude generates hermeneutic passivity from the student who becomes used to studying fixed interpretations of the texts. As a consequence, students read literary histories and biographies, criticism, introductions to editions, and study guides and there is often no time left to read the books: “Their quest is for the sophisticated interpretation and the accepted judgement” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.60).

In the history of language teaching, literary texts have been reduced to a source for linguistic learning and as an informative representation of cultural traits. Furthermore, literature has been dismissed from the foreign language classroom because frequently teachers feel competent to teach language but not literary texts. This is also a consequence of a misleading language/literature dichotomy that posits teaching language as a less sophisticated, less difficult assignment than teaching literature. (Note 4)

4. Literature and Culture

Literary texts are related with two distinct concepts of culture: a product of high culture on the one hand and, on the other, enabling insights into otherness, used as a source informing a more anthropological perspective.

The traditional literary focus (on the topics of literary texts and biographical and historical information) should be broadened and conscious intercultural reflection promoted. The purpose then is to provide the learner’s interaction with the text, with another society and culture while encouraging intercultural understanding and communication.

Iser reiterates throughout *The Act of Reading* the role of the reader and this implies pedagogical considerations for the language/literature classroom: “[...] the interpreter’s task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one. Obviously the total potential can never be fulfilled in one reading process, but it is this very fact that makes it so essential that one should conceive of meaning as something that happens” (Iser, 1980, p.22).

It is important that the teacher of foreign languages be made aware that s/he deals with personal, social and cultural aspects of human beings. This is the province of literature and probably one obvious feature that should be stressed as a fundamental point of departure in the intercultural perspective. Literature may potentially contribute to the student/reader’s image of him/herself and of the world around him/her (known and unknown). Parry, for instance, argues for the study of literature aiming at personal development by reference to contact with other cultures and calls for the need to equip our students “to be agents of social progress” (Parry, 1997, p.25).

Yet to fulfil these aims it will be inevitable that teachers and students alike, as readers, (necessarily) assume some attitude towards the “whole range of human concerns” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.8) offered by literature. This appears as a particularly salient trait if we mean literature in a foreign language-and-culture.

5. Literature and Interculturality

Actually, unseen (because they are implied) and unvoiced values and beliefs may explain, in great part, “the ever-present implied generalizations” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.8) and stereotypes that are thus born, perpetuated or reinforced in the foreign culture classroom. If we accept that reading always implies a meeting of the reader’s cultural schemata with the culture of the (con)text, it is of primary importance that one’s assumptions (moral and ethical values) are equally made explicit and discussed. The function of literature in education also concerns the anthropological dimension of literary criticism.

Abdallah-Preteille and Porcher (2005) emphasize the need to resume a main function of formal education: to teach the construction of meaning – social, historical, and cultural meaning– as well as to disseminate humanistic values in a pluralistic society and promote familiarity with alterity. For this purpose, it is fundamental that foreign language

education includes literature education and intercultural education. Teachers and trainee teachers in particular should have academic preparation about “identity”, “human rights”, and “citizenship education” (Fleming, 2006).

Linguistic communicative objectives need to be reconciled with this humanistic aim so that eventually the important thing is that through foreign languages it is possible to read and understand the world. The objective of choosing challenging texts in terms of the ethical and intercultural dilemmas they present ought to prevail over secondary criteria such as defining the degree of language difficulty or *readability* of texts. (Note 5)

In the current perspective, what seems to be missing is precisely the opportunity for readers to *experience*, imaginatively and responsibly, (Attridge, 2004) that relationship with otherness. It is through this experience –the potential contained in the literary text that distinguishes it from other texts, other documents– that meaning emerges through intercultural reflection progressing towards an understanding of otherness implied, for example, in different spaces, time, social conditions. In this perspective, meaning is relational and we may well establish a parallel between interculturality and the interaction of a reader with the literary text since understanding a foreign culture requires a continual negotiation of meaning and to be able to put the foreign culture in relation with one’s own. Both self-awareness and an element of foreignness are necessary conditions in reading and in intercultural encounters: to know what an Other is feeling, the reader will need to search more deeply into his/her skin.

6. The Classroom: A Threshold

Experiencing literature in an educational context is not the same as reading in private. The particular context of the classroom will undoubtedly influence the way texts are read since it implies certain reading conventions, and expectations will be used and influence what we read. The classroom represents a cultural setting in itself. Participants come in with varied cultural perspectives and different ways of understanding the world. However, within this particular context of the classroom, a particular type of expectations and of interaction is created and the heterogeneous cultures remain for the most part hidden, invisible. It is important to demystify the culturally homogeneous classroom and make the students realise this inescapable heterogeneity.

The environment of the classroom constitutes a safe space in terms of intercultural and literary experience: it remains confined to the actors/learners in the classroom implying no immediate consequences whatsoever in the *real world* outside. It is precisely this guarantee that enables the reader/learner to experience things that would otherwise be inaccessible and to discuss them in the light of intercultural study and learning. Moreover, these experiences become meaningful experiences engaging the learner cognitively and affectively which, in terms of learning, prevails over any kind of formal, merely theoretical or expository teaching.

Here resides part of the value and the power of literature, from the intercultural point of view:

And precisely because the literary text makes no objectively real demand on its readers, it opens up a freedom that everyone can interpret in his own way. Thus, with every text we learn not only about what we are reading but also about ourselves and this process is all the more effective if what we are supposed to experience is not explicitly stated but has to be inferred. (Iser, 1993, p.29)

Not only is the reader protected from suffering any consequences but there is a *freedom* opened up for reflection. The language/literature classroom offers, therefore, the advantages of a safe place for reflection (and metareflection) on the literary experience. Furthermore it offers readers, in this case teacher-readers and student-readers, the opportunity to live through inaccessible experiences, an enlargement of our world.

The above-mentioned *freedom* as opportunity for reflection is twofold: it concerns not only the world of the text but it is also directed towards oneself generating self-awareness. The value of the literary text in terms of intercultural learning is also facilitated from a pedagogical point of view: “this process is all the more effective if what we are supposed to experience is not explicitly stated but has to be inferred” (Iser, 1993, p.29).

The classroom presents no monocultural learning environment but a rich diversity even within national groups where we may find differences, for example, in socio-economic environments, geographic origins, family structures, and educational backgrounds.

In terms of the readers’ identities, each one has specific linguistic and cultural resources thus contributing with an individual perspective to the shared work in the classroom. Here we have an opportunity to develop strategies for students belonging ostensibly to the same nation, to learn about the Other within that nation as an essential starting point. The basic idea that different readers will produce different perceptions of the same text is not a disadvantage. On the contrary: to the language/literature teacher the latent subjectivity in every reader will be mobilised and made visible. One of the steps in preparing learners to confront another culture is to direct their look towards themselves. Self-awareness is a necessary stage in promoting de-centring from one’s culture.

7. A Place for Literature in EFL

Reading as an activity that includes a place for the reader in the text constitutes in itself an approach to the text. It implies reading critically so that instead of its limiting role of supplying knowledge, the classroom (at all levels of schooling) fosters reading critically through a pedagogy of questioning the text, searching for and building textual meaning. The privileged subject to accomplish these operations is the reader/student.

Some of the characteristics of literary texts, for example its capacity to problematise our habitual ways of seeing the world, demonstrate how literary texts constitute an opportunity to elaborate on hidden meanings; to focus on underlying values and beliefs; to engage actively with alternative interpretations of the world. All this reinforces the current view of the literary text as an opportunity to promote an intercultural encounter in terms of negotiating with an Other, one's social, cultural and political identity (Guilherme, 2001). Guilherme underlines that "Critical intercultural learning involves more than experiencing, interpreting and accommodating to other cultures, it entails making connections, exploring articulations, and changing representations" (2001, p.271). This component of individual and social change is fundamental and is addressed by Bredella, in the particular perspective of the literary text. Although Bredella does not necessarily employ the phrase "critical intercultural learning", he highlights the reflexive and critical aspect of intercultural learning as necessary conditions for one to become intercultural.

Abdallah-Preteille and Porcher relate technological development and its impact on school life with the need to keep a space where students may meet and explore an imaginative freedom through literature:

Les ordinateurs n'ont ni émotions, ni passions. Et c'est pourquoi le champ de l'enseignement de la littérature doit s'élargir au sein de l'institution éducative. La littérature c'est l'humanité de l'homme, son espace personnel. Elle rend compte à la fois de la réalité et du rêve, du passé et du présent, du matériel et du vécu. Il faut probablement qu'elle s'enseigne sous des formes neuves, inédites, correspondant aux besoins des hommes d'aujourd'hui. (Abdallah-Preteille & Porcher, 2005, p.138)

Literary texts may contribute to the development of such tools (particularly interpretation and reflection) and to the finding of a doorway to appreciate the fact that many worlds are possible and that new meanings and realities can be created.

It is of paramount importance for current student-readers that exploring literary texts in a foreign language underlines how literature offers new perspectives (depending both on the text itself and on how the reader questions the text), how the literary text can be approached from different preconceptions and how these views are directly relevant to the world we live in and the lives we lead.

To sit and dream, to sit and read,
To sit and learn about the world
Outside our world of here and now-
Our problem world-
To dream of vast horizons of the soul
Through dreams made whole,
All you who are dreamers too,
Help me to make
Our world anew.
I reach out my dreams to you.
(Hughes, 1995, p.546)

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Notes

Note 1. Kramsch and Kramsch identify a number of factors that have “[...] gradually made literature obsolete as the major discipline associated with language study”. The reasons are the “demise of philology since the late 1910s, the rise of the social sciences in 1930s, the triumph of the sciences of education in the 1930s and the overwhelming influence of linguistics since the 1950”. The authors claim a role for literature in the foreign language classroom since “the teaching of foreign literatures intersects with the social and political history of nation-states and their symbolic cultural capital” (2000, p. 553).

Note 2. I would like to observe that although Durant (1997) seems to be critical of a certain abandonment of literature in foreign language teaching and Cultural Studies, he does not, explicitly at least, argue for its re-inclusion in those areas of study.

Note 3. Abdallah-Preteuille and Porcher (2005) believe that if literature is by excellence the (re)creation of alterity, and if the experience of alterity is one aim of education, then these will become very important arguments in favour of the reintegration of literature in the human sciences. This is a shared conviction expressed in the title of this article.

Note 4. See Kramsch (2000, pp. 2-9). The author sees no intellectual justification for this dichotomy and considers it is replicated in the dichotomy opposing language/culture.

Note 5. Friedman and Cataldo (2002), for instance, discuss how characters in fine literature serve to generate philosophical discussions since literature-based dilemmas pose emotional and moral-cognitive situations similar to daily life and how this process may be used to model decision-making skills and reflective judgement in formal education. Their discussion provides concrete examples from the North-American context of English language arts teaching (the perspective of foreign language students is not considered).