

What is the Place of English Literature in ELT Classrooms? A Review of Related Studies

Tarek A. Alkhaleefah

College of Languages and Translation, Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh 11681, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Tarek A. Alkhaleefah, E-mail: tariqkh.ksa@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The debate over the place and role of literature in language classrooms has long intrigued researchers and teachers' interests over the years. Although there is an overall consensus that the teaching of literature in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms can help foster L2 learners' language skills and cognitive abilities, some researchers have suggested that integrating literature in ELT classrooms should be approached with caution due to EFL learners' limited language proficiency. In this paper, the researcher reviews previous related studies on the place of literature in the English language teaching (ELT) contexts. The aim of this review is to shed light on this researchers/teachers' ongoing debate over the place of teaching English literature in ELT. In particular, the review examines how researchers perceive the role of literature and its authenticity in ELT classrooms as stimulating learners' interests and personal engagement with literary texts, fostering L2 learners' language skills (particularly their reading and creative writing skills), and enhancing their critical thinking skills and strategic processing of texts. Furthermore, the review covers issues related to how the integration of literature in language classrooms should be carefully task-designed and assessed.

Key words: Authentic Reading Material, Critical Thinking Skill, Developing Cognitive Ability, Fostering Learners' Academic Skill

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, a large body of research has been produced over the controversial debates surrounding the place and role of literature in English language learning/teaching classrooms. Since the 1980s onwards, various researchers and practitioners have presented and argued for different and sometimes clashing views regarding whether literature should or should not be integrated in ESL/EFL settings. On the one hand there are those views that have held skepticism over the suitability and efficiency of literature in ESL/EFL classrooms. This is mainly due to the intrinsic properties of literary texts in possessing a unique use of language deeply foregrounded with some lexical, stylistic, structural and cultural complexities which are often beyond ESL/EFL learners' proficiency levels (McKay, 1982, 2001; Savvidou, 2004). On the other hand, many proponents for the integration of literature in ESL/EFL classrooms (e.g., Akyel, & Yalcin, 1990; Amer, 2003; Brumfit, & Carter, 1986; Carter & McRae, 1982, 1996; Collie & Slater, 1991; Duff & Maley, 1990; Erkaya, 2005; Gower & Pearson, 1986; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988; Langer, 1997; Lazar, 1993, 1996; Maley, 1989, 2001; McKay, 2001; Oster, 1989; Widdowson, 1983) have advanced their compelling arguments for the benefits of this integration which to their views outweigh those negative attitudes and skepticism towards this assimilation.

These advantages include, for instance, the role of literature in fostering L2 learners' language skills, particularly their reading and writing skills, and their cultural appreciation and tolerance, to name a few. For instance, Lazar (1993, pp. 14-15) lists various reasons as to why literature is essential and beneficial to language learners:

1. It is very motivating.
2. It is authentic material.
3. It has general educational value.
4. It is found in many syllabuses.
5. It helps students to understand another culture.
6. It is a stimulus for language acquisition.
7. It develops students' interpretive abilities.
8. Students enjoy it and it is fun.
9. It is highly valued and has a high status.
10. It expands students' language awareness.
11. It encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings.

Extending her discussion of some of these reasons for using literature in ELT classrooms, Lazar (1993: 17) argues that "...reading literature in English does encourage students to become broadly aware of the social, political and historical events which form the background to a particular play or novel." Not only does literature provide learners with access to cultural background, but it also encourages language acquisition, expands learners' language awareness, and devel-

ops their interpretative abilities (Lazar, 1993). Other recent studies (e.g., Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan, 2011; Takagaki, 2002; Tansen, 2010; Tehan, Yuksel & Inan, 2015) have investigated EFL learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the integration and place of literature courses in language classrooms and revealed students' mixed views regarding the efficiency and usefulness of integrating literary texts in language classrooms, particularly in reading activities.

Hence, this paper is a review of previous research on the place and role of literature in English language teaching (ELT) settings. The overall aim of this review is to inspect how researchers and practitioners have perceived the role of literature and its authenticity in ELT classrooms as stimulating learners' interests and personal engagement with literary texts, fostering L2 learners' language skills, and enhancing their critical thinking skills and strategic processing of texts. Furthermore, the review covers issues related to the methodological approaches used in assessing literature in EFL settings and how the integration of literature in language classrooms should be carefully task-designed and assessed.

LITERARY TEXTS IN RELATION TO LANGUAGE LEARNERS' REFLECTIONS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

A number of researchers have asserted and inspected the pedagogical context of teaching literature in the ESL/EFL classrooms, in general, and the teaching of short stories in particular (Brumfit, & Carter, 1986; Collie & Slater, 1991; Erkaya, 2005; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988; Lazar, 1993, 1996; Oster, 1989) to allow readers make personal connections with the text content. Langer (1997: 607), for instance, argues that literature is distinctive in tapping into students' reflections of their own lives; hence providing "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore." Hirvela & Boyle (1988) also support the integration of literature in ESL/EFL classrooms and lay out the advantages of teaching short stories, in particular, to help L2 learners develop their language skills. First, the researchers provided a brief historical overview of how the teaching of literature was debated within the domain of traditional language approaches that occupied the arena of language learning in classrooms. Then they went on to state some of the benefits gained in teaching short stories which include "motivational, literal, cultural and higher-order thinking benefits. [and] reinforcement of skills" (p. 2).

Similarly, Oster (1989) argues that the teaching of literature (short stories in this respect) in ESL classrooms can be immensely rewarding if L2 learners are to be oriented in making continuous personal connections with the narrative point of views in the texts they read. Although she recognizes how cultural and/or educational contexts of the L2 learners' background might pose difficulties for them to wear the multi-angled 'lenses' of observing different perspectives than their own, Oster claims that the teaching of literary texts could still foster in language learners the necessary analytical and critical skills.

Here, Oster's (1989) position draws attention to the multi-dimensional views a literary text can create for readers in

bringing their own personal experiences to be compared and/or contrasted to those of the fictional characters'. Hence, this experience pushes readers to unravel their own reactions and feelings about the point of views they relate to in the narrative stories. Oster provided few short stories and novels that she herself used in her classrooms and recounted examples of her L2 learners' responses which reflected an increase in the students' self-awareness of identifying similar or different experiences to those stated by the characters. Her argument strongly suggests that engaging students in continuous processes of observing the point of views should trigger their deep associations and experiences that are rich and vivid in figurative expressions and images.

ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY OF LITERATURE IN STIMULATING LANGUAGE LEARNERS' INTERESTS AND PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT

Other advocates for the integration of literature in ESL/EFL classrooms (e.g., Babaee & Yahya, 2014; Carter & McRae, 1982, 1996; Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012; Erkaya, 2005; Matos, 2011; Yimwilai, 2015) all agree on the suitability of using literary genres in language learning classrooms. Some researchers (e.g., Collie & Slater, 1987; Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012; Erkaya, 2005; Gareis, Allard, & Saindon 2009; Lazar, 1993) have all argued for the use of authentic literary texts (e.g., short stories and novels) in FL classrooms in order to stimulate learners' interests and interpretive skills, encourage them to reveal their opinions and feelings, and facilitate their personal engagement with texts.

Erkaya (2005), for instance, strongly supports the use of short stories in language learning settings. He first provides a brief discussion of the learning advantages of teaching short stories as reported in previous studies (e.g., Lazar, 1993, 1996; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988), and then suggests a number of activities for language instructors (in covering each of the five categories of advantages he listed) to use when teaching "the Wisdom of Solomon" as a selected short story. In drawing its conclusion, the author again asserts the intrinsic qualities of short stories to be suitable materials for language teaching and learning. However, Erkaya's (2005: 10) remarks tend to be over generalizing and somehow illusive in meaning when he, for instance, stated that "...one can say that integrating short stories into the curriculum will help EFL students to become well-rounded professional and human beings since short stories teach more than the skills necessary for survival in the target language."

However, other studies have questioned the adequacy and efficiency of conventional course materials that utilized authentic literary texts in language classrooms to facilitate students' interests and motivation (Ghosn, 2002; Peacock, 1997; Su, 2010; Tomlinson, 1986). Peacock's (1997), for instance, questions previous research that advocated an intrinsic link between L2 learners' motivation and the teaching of authentic materials in EFL classrooms. His study hypothesizes that the teaching of such materials, which he defines as those used "to fulfill some social purpose in the language community" (p. 146), might not necessarily lead to an increase in learners' motivation in engaging with the

language class activities and tasks. With this in mind, the researcher conducted an empirical investigation in two beginner-level language classrooms in a South Korean university, aimed at testing this hypothesis. As a researcher-teacher, he used various authentic materials that included “two poems; some television listings; two short stories; an advice column from a local English-language newspaper; an American pop song; and some English language magazine advertisements” (p. 146). These materials were used in an experimental study in order to validate the research hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between the use of authentic materials and the change of “on-task behavior, observed motivation, and self-reported motivation.” (p. 146).

Using qualitative methods in collecting and analyzing the study data, Peacock’s (1997) study reveals that there is an increase in the learners’ ‘overall’ motivation when engaged in the discussion of authentic materials in class. The results of the questionnaires, however, provides “no significant difference in self-reported learner motivation when learners used authentic materials” (p. 150) though learners’ responses indicated an inconsistent degree in their preferences for reading authentic and artificial materials for classroom activities. The learners’ responses to the materials in the interviews (80 in total) also varied, which led to the research finding that “overall, learners reported authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than artificial materials” (p. 152). This did not conform to the asserting views of previous research which correlated learning motivation with learners’ interest in studying authentic materials. Peacock (1997) concludes that attributing learners’ motivation to the teaching of authentic materials and not considering other sources of classroom motivation in explaining the increase in learners’ on-task behaviors is somehow misleading.

In a similar study, Ghosn (2002) criticizes EFL course materials that are inadequate in addressing learners’ *real* needs. She claims that “[t]raditional ELT materials may fail to provide adequate support for development of L2 academic literacy” (p. 172). Instead, she suggests using *children’s literature* (CL) as an alternative material in primary school levels. Defining CL as “...fiction written for children to read for pleasure, rather than for didactic purposes” (p. 172), Ghosn explains that there are four main reasons why ‘authentic’ children’s literature should be used in EFL classroom:

First, authentic literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning...Second, literature can contribute to language learning....Third, literature can promote academic literacy and thinking skills....Fourth, literature can function as a change agent... (Ghosn, 2002: 173)

One of Ghosn’s criticism of EFL materials is their lack of motivating learner since the selection of the materials is circled around topics and activities which “fail to offer readers any satisfaction.” (p. 173). As for language learning, Ghosn argues that there is a strong relationship between literature and learners’ language-learning development. Moreover, Ghosn affirms that the teaching of literature in EFL contexts might help students in content/subject-based courses where they are required to take in their institutions. Furthermore, Ghosn argues that reading literary texts does not only foster

language learners with emotional intelligence but also empowers them with academic competence that calls for their creative and “critical thinking skills.” Ghosn (2002: 177) also asserts her position that “children’s literature can provide a motivating medium through which these needs can be addressed in the EFL class” and suggests that literature instructors should be careful in their selection of stories to be accompanied by “appropriate follow-up activities” (p. 177).

Despite their criticism of the course materials used in EFL classrooms, Peacock (1997) and Ghosn’s (2002) articles still fall into the same arguments proposed in previous research (e.g., Brumfit, & Carter, 1986; Collie & Slater, 1991; Duff & Maley, 1990; Erkaya, 2005; Gower & Pearson, 1986; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988; Langer, 1997; Lazar, 1993, 1996; Maley, 2001; Oster, 1989; Widdowson, 1983) which have advocated the integration of literature in EFL classrooms. Ghosn’s (2002) study, in particular, discuss the issue of authenticity in literature as beneficial in 1) stimulating students’ interests, 2) boosting learners’ language and critical thinking skills, 3) engaging learners in personal involvement with texts, and 4) providing them with access to cross-cultural issues and debates.

ROLE OF LITERATURE IN DEVELOPING LEARNERS’ LANGUAGE SKILLS AND STRATEGIC PROCESSING OF LITERARY TEXTS

Furthermore, proponents of the use of literature in language classrooms have argued that the authenticity of literature can help develop learners’ language skills, particularly their reading and writing skills (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Crain, 1993; Erkaya, 2005; Spack, 1985; Stern, 2001). For instance, a number of studies have maintained that literature can provide EFL learners with tasks that involve careful reading of assigned literary texts and engage them in strategic processing of the text content (e.g., skimming, scanning, questioning, identifying themes, making inferences, etc.), as well as in extensive and intensive reading, particularly in poetry (Lazar, 1996; Tomlinson, 1986). Similarly, most researchers agree that literature is a rich source for language teachers to involve their students in writing practices in which they respond to short and essay questions about the text content, and help them develop their L2 writing and composition skills (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Crain, 1993; Spack, 1985; Vandrick, 1996). Hence, the teaching of literature is perceived to be a powerful asset not only for language learners’ ‘language enrichment’ but for their ‘cultural enrichment’ as well (Collie and Slater, 1991).

As for the teaching of poetry, some researchers (Lazar, 1996; Tomlinson, 1986) have advocated and advanced their arguments for the use of poetry (and short stories) as a powerful motivating tool in language classrooms. Tomlinson (1986: 34-35), for instance, asserts the valuable outcomes of using poetry ‘with mixed ability classes’, and argues for a set of criterion guidelines in selecting poems for classes, and providing some ‘practical’ activities that could be adapted when teaching poems to L2 learners. Tomlinson lists six ‘values’ that often come out of the teaching of poetry in EFL

classrooms: 1) the *educational* value, 2) the *affective* value, 3) the *achievement* value, 4) the *individual* value, 5) the *stimulus* value, and 6) the *skill* development. Tomlinson (1986) then argues that any approach in using poems to promote development of language skills to L2 learners should be balanced to match their proficiency levels and abilities. Tomlinson then shifts focus in discussing what he regards as crucial criteria in the selection of poems for language classroom purposes. These include ‘*universal appeal*’ (choosing topics that are universal in scope), ‘*surface simplicity*’ (a language that is not linguistically complex in structure), ‘*potential depth*’ (in meaning of content), ‘*affective potential*’ (poems that embody intensity of emotions and attitudes), ‘*contemporary language*’ (of poems that learners can relate in learning), ‘*brevity*’ (using short rather than long poems), and ‘... for illustration’ (using audio or visual methods in teaching poems) (p. 34-35). In suggesting the practical pre-reading activities in teaching poetry, Tomlinson insists on the need for language learners to be involved in the *content*, rather than the *linguistic* (this includes the exclusion of a vocabulary-focused activities) aspects of the given poems (p. 36).

EVALUATING METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES USED IN ASSESSING LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

There have been various studies inspecting different important methodological approaches used in the teaching of literature in EFL settings and assessing the outcomes of integrating literary texts in language classrooms (e.g., Carter & Long, 1991; Maley, 1989, 2001; Stern, 2001; Timucin, 2001; Widdowson, 1983). For instance, Maley (1989) proposes that teaching literature can be observed from two distinctive approaches: 1) the critical literary approach (that focuses on the literary and cultural conventions of literary texts), and 2) the stylistic approach (concerned with engaging learners in reading literary texts to develop their limited language skills). However, few of these approaches have seriously criticized the suitability and efficiency of conventional tests and models used to assess the integration of literature in EFL settings.

Carter and Long (1990, 1991), for instance, examined the three examples of ‘conventional approaches’ to the examina-

tion of literature in EFL classrooms. These include 1) the ‘*Paraphrase and context*’, 2) the ‘*Describe and discuss*’, and 3) the ‘*Evaluate and criticize*’ (pp. 216-217). In discussing these traditional approaches to literature tests, the authors explored positive and negative characteristics of these approaches as follows:

1. Asserting the mechanical pattern of having learners read the text as “a sequence of events, a series of facts, or a set of behaviors.” (p. 217)
2. Allowing the possibility that learners might use a translation of the text in answering the questions (p. 217)
3. Forcing learners to draw their focus “on the essay mode [which] may provide too much encouragement to retell plots and formulate second-hand judgments.” (p. 217)

Instead of relying on some traditional models, Carter and Long (1990, 1991) argue for alternative ‘language-based approaches’ (LBA) that accounted for three major questions: 1) ‘general comprehension’ questions, 2) ‘text focus’ questions, and 3) ‘personal response and impact’ questions, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Carter and Long (1990) argue that learners, when engaged in these language-driven approaches, seem “to develop independent interpretive and critical skills by reading through language...” (p. 217), a claim suggested in previous research (e.g., Collie & Slater, 1987; Erkaya, 2005; Ghosn, 2002; Hirvela & Boyle 1988; Lazar, 1996; Oster, 1989), as well. To sum up, Carter and Long (1990) conclude their arguments by asserting that “...it is vital that literature examinations should return students to the text and its uses of language as the organizing center of their experience” (p. 221).

Other research on the integration of literature in language classrooms has shifted focus into examining important pedagogical issues related to the teaching of literary texts in EFL classrooms (e.g., Brumfit, & Carter, 1986; Collie & Slater, 1991; Duff & Maley, 1990; Lazar, 1993, 1996; Maley, 2001). Norris (1994), for instance, examines the inadequacy of the traditional teacher-centered approach that had long dominated the academic contexts of Japanese colleges and universities. Instead, he argues for the need to have L2 learners develop *top-down* and *bottom-up* skills and strategies in reading classroom texts. He proposes that the “[r]eading of any text must be treated as real reading, that is, reading for meaning. No student should ever be forced or encouraged to limit him- or herself to mere decoding skills” (p. 28).

Table 1. The language-based approaches (LBA)

The three LBA questions	Definition	Aim (s)
‘General comprehension’ questions	Students respond to some given questions ‘which seek to determine general comprehension’ (p. 219)	‘...is to enable students to react to the general situation or themes enacted in the text.’ (p. 219)
‘Text focus’ questions	Learners are focused on ‘the ways in which language is patterned’ (p. 219)	‘...is not to test comprehension, but to see to what extent the learner is able (and willing) to make inferences, and to get some insight into the way in which s/he analyses a poem in the process of deducing meaning from it.’ (p. 219)
‘Personal response and impact’ questions	Questions that are ‘task-based’...more inventive, and require more extend writing.’ (p. 220)	‘...is to attempt to measure a candidate’s imaginative response to the text and to use language directly in order to register that response.’ (p. 220)

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper aimed to provide a review of key debates over the place and role of literature in language classrooms and how this has long intrigued researchers and teachers' interests. Our approach in this review has been to examine proponents' views on the role of literature in providing specific advantages for language learners in classrooms. These include the importance of literature in helping stimulate learners' interests and personal engagement with literary texts, fostering EFL learners' language skills (particularly their reading and writing skills), and developing learners' critical thinking skills. Moreover, the review has covered issues related to how the integration of literature in language classrooms should be carefully task-designed and assessed. However, it is worth mentioning that a major downside of some of the previous studies reviewed here (e.g., Erkaya, 2005; Ghosn, 2002; Oster, 1989) is that the argument for supporting the use of literature in ELT classrooms has not been fully validated using meticulous and rigorous methods of collecting and analyzing data from EFL context in order to attest the validity and applicability of the assumptions put forward. Hence, more future research in different learning contexts involving different methodological approaches and different designs to examine the impact of using literature on language learners' abilities is certainly needed.

One of the main implications of this review is to re-assert previous researchers and practitioners' long held position on the importance of incorporating literary texts in language teaching materials. In other words, EFL teachers should encourage learners to engage in classrooms activities that involve, for instance, reading selected authentic literary texts (e.g., short stories) to develop their reading strategies and fluency, as well as their critical thinking skills. Apart from being exposed to the cultural aspects of literary texts, EFL learners might gain considerably from extensive reading tasks involving authentic literary materials that are interesting and self-engaging inside and outside the classroom. That is, reading literature not only provides language learners with opportunities to promote their cultural awareness and tolerance, but also extends their existing knowledge and experience of the world around them (Collie & Slater, 1991; Duff & Maley, 1990; Erkaya, 2005; Gower & Pearson, 1986; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988; Langer, 1997; Lazar, 1993, 1996; Maley, 1989, 2001).

When carefully selected, literary texts can be beneficial and rewarding to EFL learners because literature ".increases the exposure to the target language, reveals unusual and unexpected uses of the language, stimulates language acquisition and provides a motivating and enjoyable way of learning the language" (Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012: 1185). Also, understanding and appreciating world's cultures and traditions can be brought closer to EFL learners when engaged in reading literature which enables learners "to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space, and to come to perceive tradition of thought and feeling and artistic form in those cultures" (Carter & Long, 1991: 2). Similarity, Lazar (1993) sums up the benefits of integrating literature in language classrooms

by arguing how literary texts "...offer a wide range of styles and registers; they are open to multiple interpretations and hence provide excellent opportunities for classroom discussion" (p. 27).

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