

## **Literature in English for Specific Purposes Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper I will explore advantages and disadvantages of using literature in language teaching, with special emphasis on its potential use in English for specific purposes (hereafter ESP) classroom. Firstly, I will give a review of some papers regarding the use of literature in English as a foreign language (hereafter EFL) classrooms. Secondly, I will point out the difference between an EFL and ESP. Finally, I will offer my opinion regarding the use of literature in ESP classrooms.*

**Keywords:** *English for specific purposes (ESP), literature, English as a foreign language (EFL), teaching*

### **1. Introduction**

Complex language structures, advanced vocabulary and a need for an additional time in classrooms makes using literature in language teaching a challenge. Recently I have come across an opportunity to teach an ESP class which led me to think about incorporating literature in ESP classroom. Therefore, in this paper I will try to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of using literature in language classrooms with special emphasis on its potential usage in ESP classrooms.

For many years teaching English language was not closely connected to literature. Even today, literature is rarely found in EFL textbooks. Instead, textbooks are filled with over-simplified texts that supposedly imitate life activities, situations and conversations. The teachers' profession has rejected these texts due to the lack of authenticity claiming that they do not present real life situations but isolated exchange of words. Sell (2005:91) described it well when he said “*Not only do they (English language textbooks) tend to peddle a version of English which is abnormal in its normativeness, deviant in its purity, but they also use fictional storylines to introduce learners to various situations, points of grammar or lexical fields and often employ non-authentic recordings of actors with bogus accents for listening exercises.*” The avoidance of literature in textbooks was justified by the complexity of language, grammar and vocabulary used in those texts. According to general belief complex vocabulary, language structures and topics from literary texts could not help the learning process which is why they were avoided in language classrooms. In more recent years using literature in English language classrooms became a topic often discussed in teaching circles.

Many teachers started using parts of famous literary texts in their classrooms as well as many publishers started incorporating parts of original literature in their textbooks. So, what changed? Can language learners benefit from reading literature on target language or not? And what about ESP learners, can literature answer their “specific” language needs? I will try to offer an answer to these questions in this paper.

## **2. Why should we use literature in our language classrooms?**

Collie and Slater (1990:3) argue that there are four main reasons why teachers should use literature in their classrooms and they are: valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. I will try to analyze each of the reasons listed.

### **2.1 Valuable authentic material**

Collie and Slater describe literature as a valuable source of authentic material. Authenticity of learning material is very important in language learning process, because it prepares learners for “real life” language usage. Teachers believe that non-authentic learning material teaches students unusable language skills and presents isolated conversations rarely seen in real life. Consequently, English language teacher is always on a look for authentic materials that can be used in classrooms; which is why having such a wide source of authentic material, such as literature, is valuable to a teacher.

### **2.2 Cultural enrichment**

The second reason that Collie and Slater list is cultural enrichment. Teachers have known for a long time that we cannot teach a language without teaching about its culture. The two are inevitably intertwined which is why the correct use of a language partly depends on understanding its cultural background. As a result, there is not an EFL textbook that does not incorporate texts about the culture of English speaking nations. Literature (poems, stories, novels etc.) is a gate to learning about a culture of a nation. From it we can learn about the country, its people, how they behave, what they do in certain situations, how they react; what expressions/phrases they use; what they say in certain situations...

### **2.3 Language enrichment**

The third reason that Collie and Slater list is language enrichment. All language learners have to be aware that learning language is a constant enrichment of one’s vocabulary. Without vocabulary enrichment the learning process will stop at the acquisition level and a learner will never learn to use the language, at least not appropriately. Sentence structures, language tenses, word formation can take a learner only so far, vocabulary enrichment is what develops a communicative competence<sup>1</sup> which is a general goal of every learner.

### **2.4 Personal involvement**

According to Collie and Slater the last reason for using literary texts in EFL classrooms is personal involvement. Personal involvement is inevitable part of reading books or any other literary work; moreover, the writer expects from a reader to get personally involved in order to grasp the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> Communicative competence is a phrase coined by Hymes as a ability of a speaker to use the language correctly and appropriately

he/she is trying to convey through his/her literary expression. Such involvement of a reader has a positive effect on a language learning process. A reader imagines, compares, discusses, changes, likes and hates; he is compelled to read the book, to imagine its characters, to sympathize, to judge, to love and to hate. If a learner is personally intrigued (involved) by the book he will read more, he will think about the book and the characters; by doing so he will be exposed to more and more target language which is a valuable language practice. Generally speaking, it is more probable that a learner will read if he/she is personally intrigued by the text.

There are many other linguists that promote using literature in foreign language classroom; for example Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000: 9-11) list ten ways how a student can benefit from literature. Some of these reasons overlap with the reasons Collie and Slater offered and they are as follows: cultural enrichment, linguistic model, mental training, extension of linguistic competence, authenticity, memorability, rhythmic resource, motivating material, open to interpretation and convenience.

On the other hand Khatib M., Rezaci S. and Derakhshan A. (2011:207) claim that literature *“provides a motivating drive for language learning and teaching due to its spectacular features not readily found in any other texts.”*, while Sell (2005:92) argues *“literature’s contents may well be truer to life and more relevant to learners than the typical textbook topics”*.

All these authors explain what is evident, and that is that literature can play a great part in a language learning process.

### **3. Why don't we use literature in classroom?**

In reality many teachers avoid using literature in their classrooms. Preparing for such lectures is extremely time-consuming and challenging. Success of such lectures depends on many factors which should be considered before making such an attempt. Accordingly, before attempting to promote the usage of literature in ESP classrooms or any other language classroom for that matter, I will try to analyze the main negative sides of using literature in English language classroom as well. So what makes using literature in language classroom a demanding task that makes many teachers “give up” on it?

Sell (2005:86) claims that one of the reasons that teachers avoid implementing literature in foreign language classroom is politics. He further claims that by incorporating works by famous authors such as Shakespeare we would be *“condemned to cultural imperialism”* because authors and works presented in language classroom usually conform to the general preferences, rarely differ from classroom to classroom and usually cater public point of view. The other reason that Sell mentions is methodology. Foreign language classroom is oriented towards communicative competence and preparing students for interaction in a real world, and Sell claims that literature unreal, based on imagination and has almost nothing to do with reality.

In my opinion, literature is avoided in language classrooms because of its complexity in form, meaning and language. Many teachers believe that texts used in classrooms should mirror the real life situations. That might be a challenge when dealing with authors like Shakespeare, Yeats or Hemingway. Many would argue that the language used as well as sentence structures are “out of date” and for that reason have no place in foreign language classrooms, especially since it has been agreed that communicative competence is a goal that a language learner wishes to achieve. So, are

we here to teach students Shakespearian language or global English used for communicative purposes? Is it confusing for a student to read expressions and sentences that are inadequately used according to today's language rules? It probably is, but where is it written that Shakespearean sonnets are the literature that we should be teaching in classrooms? There are many modern authors whose works are rich in language expressions and sentence structures that answer modern learner's needs.

At the end, preparing for such a class is time consuming for teachers which is why they often avoid such attempts. A teacher has to take into the account many factors when planning such a lecture; for example language level of the students, diversity of the class (different ability levels), topic preference, author preference, availability of the book and others. Meeting all of these requirements is a demanding job.

#### **4.ESP and literature**

After a short analysis of the usage of literature in EFL classrooms, I will try to address the main issue of the paper; the usage of literature in ESP classroom. To do so I first have to point out the difference between the two types of English language teaching. Hence, what is the difference between ESP and the EFL? L. Fiorito (2005) put it well when he said that the difference is in the learner and his/her needs. In accordance, ESP learner has a specific reason for learning a language while EFL learner is learning a language for communicative purposes. So, after a vast growth in number of English language learners the need to redefine objectives of an EFL classroom emerged and it became obvious that the needs of English language learners changed. Therefore, teachers started adjusting their classes to the needs of their students, because it was obvious that teaching English as a second language was a misuse of time and effort in some language classes. Students became aware of what they need from their English language class and consequently English for specific purposes (ESP) was defined as a different approach to teaching English language (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) listed three reasons why ESP emerged: the demand of the Brave New World, revolution in linguistics and focus on the learner. They further explained that the result of the mentioned changes was a pressure on teachers to meet the demands of the changing world. ESP was an inevitable result of such changes. They defined ESP *"as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning"* (Hutchinson and Waters; 1987:19).

Having in mind the differences between EFL and ESP classrooms, one wonders is there a benefit of using literature in ESP classroom? Can a construction worker, learning a language for the purpose of conducting his job, profit from reading literature? Earlier, I listed four reasons why we should use literature in foreign language classrooms; first of which was authenticity. Can authenticity be a valid reason to use literature in ESP classroom? When teaching a nurse medical vocabulary or an economist to write his CV can literature meet these learners' needs? It seems that in the ESP classroom the authenticity teachers are looking for becomes different and specific; just like the "learning purpose" of a learner. So, the type of an authentic material in ESP classroom largely depends on the learner's needs and depending on the learner's needs it could but rarely is found in literature.

The second reason, listed earlier, why teachers should use literature in their classrooms is cultural enrichment. Is there a reason for an architect or a doctor going to work in a foreign country to learn

about that country's culture? This is definitely true. Cultures differ tremendously and are an essential part of any language and communication process; as a result knowing only language rules of a language does not make us competent to communicate. Consequently, it does not matter what type of language classroom we are teaching, learning about its culture should be an integral part.

The third reason for using literature in language classrooms is language enrichment. Although any language learning process is based on expansion of the learner's vocabulary; an ESP learner usually needs to learn a "specific" type of vocabulary. Depending on a type of ESP classroom literature might, but rarely meets the needs of such students.

The last reason listed earlier is personal involvement. Other than being a great motivation to read and broaden one's vocabulary; personal involvement of a reader has no other positive effect on the learning process in ESP classroom.

On the other side, negative sides of using literary text in the classroom are same in both ESP and EFL classrooms. The process is challenging and time consuming; it is hard to find suitable literary texts that would answer learner's needs, be available and appropriate (both in meaning and form). But, in ESP classrooms there are some other challenges that teachers have to overcome as well. For example, ESP learners usually, but not always, have poorer background knowledge which is why most literary texts might be challenging for them. Furthermore, ESP classes are usually limited in time, what makes using literature in classroom an unnecessary distraction from the main learning goal. In addition, learner's motivation to read literature is also a problem; in ESP classes a learner might not see the point of reading literature nor have time to do so. Due to all of these reasons motivating ESP learners to read might be the greatest challenge teachers will face.

## **5. Conclusion**

As a conclusion, I recommend using literature in ESP classrooms; although learners' needs in such classrooms are very specific they all presuppose the basic communicative competence. Unfortunately, a large number of ESP learners lack the basic communicative competence which is why an ESP teacher mustn't forget to practice basic communicative skills. In accordance, although literature usually has little or nothing to do with "specific" part of learning process of ESP classes (depending on the type of an ESP classroom), the communicative competence of a learner, basic or advanced, is greatly supported by reading literature.

In accordance, under an assumption that we can motivate our students to read, literature can be an integral part of every ESP classroom. Obviously, it is not an essential part and teachers should respect that in their expectations from their students. Accordingly, learners should be the ones to choose the type of literary expression, the author and the way it will be used in classroom.

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