

## The Place of Literature In the Iranian EFL Textbooks In High School Level

*Sahar Jafari*<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The present study is an attempt to investigate the place of literature in Iranian English language textbooks at the high school level of education. The course books in current foreign and second language settings appear to promote a reductionism view of language learning. Under its hegemony, language learners have been led to believe that language is a set of transactions, which they need to master in order to meet exam requirements/ academic standards. Such a belief has precluded our students from looking at language learning as a life-long educational endeavor and as an instrument of constructive social change/empowerment. The course-book drills neither provide frameworks for the learners to have an emotional engagement with the language nor nourish their capacity for imaginative and expressive use of language. Consequently, the students are subject to an educationally unrewarding language learning experience, which denies them of agency and voice. This study makes it clear that the current materials or textbooks are shallow and superficial with respect to their treatment of literature. Generally speaking, English as it is taught in Iran is a representation of the Persian. They are therefore inadequate to the task of teaching literature specifics in the deeper sense or literature-general skills such as communication and understanding.

### **Introduction**

Literary texts provide students with valuable experiences that would otherwise not be introduced into their lives. Such literary texts occupy a special place in an English language arts program. Literature typically involves the use of language and the imagination to represent, recreate, and explore human experiences. Literary texts celebrate the richness and

---

<sup>1</sup> - Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch

Proceedings of The Research in Language Science

power of language; stimulate the imagination and aesthetic awareness and shape thought and understanding.

Reading texts for literary experience is different from reading them for information. Rosenblatt (1985) offers a starting point for thinking about the reading of texts when she defines two general stances readers may choose when constructing meaning and responding to literature. In one stance (i.e., the **effereent stance**) the reader's purpose is primarily to gain information and analyze the author's technique. The emphasis is on recalling, paraphrasing, and analyzing detail. In the second stance (i.e., the **aesthetic stance**) the reader's purpose is primarily to "live through" the experience presented in the text and to associate the text with personal experience and feelings. The emphasis is on personally connecting with the text as one reads, developing deeper insights into the human experience, and responding thoughtfully to the ideas and insights presented. This stance is encouraged by having students explore their initial understanding and perspectives of a text.

Although some scholars do not support the use of literary texts in language classrooms except the advanced level, Maxim (2002) investigated the use of authentic literary texts during the first semester of beginner-level German classrooms. He found that the students were able to read an authentic German romance novel during the 4th week of their exposure to the target language. He reported no significant differences in the standardized exam scores of the control group and the authentic reading group. Investigating reading abilities of second language learners, Bernhardt (2002) provided evidence that grammar skills and linguistic ability accounts only for 30% of second language reading performance. These findings contradict with earlier claims that studying authentic literary texts requires advanced level language proficiency. For Schultz (2002) the rise of communicative competence methodologies favoring oral language skills is a reason for the lack of interest in the use of literature in language classrooms. The interest in the communicative competence theory during the 1980s made literature and authentic literary texts disappear from language classrooms (Kramersch & Kramersch, 2000; Schultz, 2002).

Although literature is a major component in the undergraduate study programs, the students are more inclined to develop their language skills. Thus, they devote less time to reading literature. A major setback in integrating literature into foreign language curriculum is the lack of language competency of students at the beginning of their study

The Place of Literature In the Iranian .....

programs. **Lack of appreciation for literature**, in general, due to traditional teaching methods and the stigma attached to it as being a difficult and uninteresting area also results in the students' further drawing themselves away from the literature. As Schulz (1981, pp. 43-53) observes, **linguistic complexity** of a text affects accessibility, comprehensibility, and the pleasure of enjoying literature in foreign language learning. The researchers found that 'what seemed to put the anti-literature students off was the obligation to study literature, as distinct from reading it for enjoyment or personal development.

The learning traditions of Iran produce **passive learners** heavily dependent on teachers as a result of teacher-centered learning in schools for over twelve years of their education. The reluctance to express one's opinion, inability to work independently and take own decisions, heavy reliance on lecture notes read out in class, collective thinking and lack of critical and analytical skills all lead to obstacles in mastering a foreign language, as these are the very qualities that a student of FLT should not possess.

In this paper I am going to talk about the significance of literary texts in improving general language proficiency. Topics to be discussed here are:

1. What is literature?
2. Why do we study literature?
3. History of teaching English literature to non-native English speaking people
4. Role of literature in Iranian English high school textbooks

### **Literature Review**

#### **What is literature?**

At this juncture it will be helpful to attempt a workable definition of literature in order to put this paper into its fitting context. Jacobson's view suggests that literature, primarily, is to be taken as text, as discourse; the language of literature is the medium through which a writer conveys a message about reality to the reader. Proceeding along this line of inquiry; Jacobson (1988) suggests that 'literariness', meaning, the language of literature is its poeticity. It is like oil in cooking. It cannot be had on its own. But when used with other foods, it is more than a mere addition; it changes the taste of the food to the extent that some dishes no longer appear to have any connection with their oil-less ingredients. This

Proceedings of The Research in Language Science

is to suggest that there is some connection between poeticity (i.e. literariness) and reality.

In English, “literature” has two vastly different meanings, one very broad and the other rather specific. “Literature” in the broad sense of the word refers to anything that is written, and this includes all writings which have a factual or informative nature. In this broad sense a newspaper account of a fire which broke out in a factory last weekend, for instance, is regarded as literature. Literary works-stories, poems and plays-are not written to give us such kind of factual information; rather, they are written to familiarize us with life. And this is the second and real meaning of the word “literature”: in its specific sense, literature refers to writings which communicate life experiences or thoughts and feelings about life.

Literature falls into two major types: written and oral. **Oral literature** includes myth, jokes, folk tales and fables. *Myths* are the fairy tales with lots of adventure, magic and it lacks scientific proof. Nursery rhymes, songs are forms of myths that strike the interest of children. *Folk Tales* are traditional stories that have been creating interest since ancient times. **Written source** has fictional and non-fictional literature. Fictional literature has the genres prose, drama, novel, short stories and poetry. Non-fictional literature includes autobiography and biography, literary criticism, diary, journal and newspaper.

**Why do we study literature?**

For some fundamental reasons we devote a good deal of our time to literature:

- 1) Our personal experience of life is so limited that we can only have a small knowledge of the different aspects of life. We can widen our experiences and thus deepen our understanding of life’s complexity through literature.
- 2) Literature in FL textbooks creates awareness in students on the culture and society of the relevant country. Literary texts illustrate cultural patterns that represent a plurality of attitudes, beliefs, ideas and ways of life.
- 3) Literature enables us to understand our own nature as well as that of the people around us.
- 4) Literature helps us develop sensibility and compassion for human beings.

The Place of Literature In the Iranian .....

5) Literature provides the opportunity for comparing and contrasting human behaviors. So we can arrive at certain criteria for evaluating human behaviors.

6) Literature provides us with situations in life that we have not personally experienced. In this way it helps our intellectual growth and enables us to tackle our troubles in a more effective way.

7) Integrating literature in FLT paves way for equipping students with a number of skills including development of critical thinking, analytical skills, formulating and expressing independent opinions, presenting one's own interpretations independently, improving language competence, such as reading, speaking and writing skills.

8) 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).

9) The use of literature promotes language acquisition. In most second language classrooms, students read and write in order to find the input in the target language. The need to decipher written input in English becomes an important instructional objective demanding that students process and interpret the target language.

10) The use of literature promotes motivation in the classroom. By strengthening the affective and emotional domains of students, literature develops a sense of involvement in them (Carter and Long, 1991; Collie and Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993).

11) Engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system.

12) The use of literature develops language awareness in students. The interesting contexts provided by literary texts serve to illustrate the noticeability of lexical and syntactical features. Prolonged exposure to literary texts not only familiarizes students with the numerous interesting features of the written language but also develops the response potential in them.

### **History of teaching English literature to non-native English speaking people**

For hundreds of years, the use of literary texts in language education was looked upon as a venerable tradition; so, its role in the foreign language curriculum was unquestioned. The grammar-translation method was regarded as a preparation for the study of literary works (Kelly, 1969). The traditional scholastic approach used the grammar-translation method to equip learners in the eighteenth century with a reading knowledge of foreign languages and applied this knowledge to the interpretation of literary texts with the use of a dictionary. The texts of reputed literary authors assumed particular relevance and significance in the traditional methods of the school curriculum and examinations. As a result, the literary texts became a tool for promoting grammar-oriented and dictionary-referenced learning practices.

The issue of teaching English literature in a non-native context dates back from the early years of 20th century when literature was considered of high prestige in language study and access to literary works was assumed part of the purpose of language learning (Widdowson 1984). However, on the one hand the difficulty and the inaccessibility of many literary texts to non-native English speaking students and on the other, the lack of a consistent and suitable methodology for the teaching of literature brought about rather the opposite effect than the expected one. The literature class consisted often of a teacher who was the only speaker and passive students writing translations of unfamiliar words to respond to the text'(Long 1986).

Consequently, literature teaching disappeared gradually from the language classroom. Texts carrying structure only with no literary effect replaced authentic texts (Candlin 1984). Structuralism on the one hand, with the emphasis on correctness in grammatical form and repetition of a restricted lexis was incompatible with the teaching of literature. On the other hand, the Communicative approach to language teaching emphasized the study of the language for practical purposes and since literature has no obvious practical uses, it contributed nothing to the objectives of language teaching thus, it had no place in the language classroom. So, literature was pushed into the background. However, during the 1980s there was again a strong interest in literature and language teaching. Linguists and ELT scholars (Widdowson 1984, Brumfit 1985, Long 1986) argued not only for the value of teaching

The Place of Literature In the Iranian .....

literature in the language classroom but for the necessity of a different pedagogical approach for non-native speakers of English.

Students continued to major in English literature in many universities across the globe. This is largely due to a rediscovery, by many practicing language teachers of the benefits of using literary text as a source of imaginative, interactive and discussion activities (Collie and Slater, 1987; Duff and Maley, 1990; McRae, 1991). This approach to Literature in the FL/SL classroom has achieved a more reasonable balance in that, it has moved away from the traditional approaches that treated literary texts as objects of academic enquiry. As a result, this new approach has enhanced the usefulness of a literary text in stimulating language-learning activities (Duff and Maley, 1990). By engaging the students and teachers interactively with the text, in the performance of tasks involving literary texts, the present approach encourages the students to generate language and develop proficiency in the use of the target language by providing them with an emotional involvement with the target language (McRae, 1991).

In recent years the reawakening of interest in the teaching of literature to non-native students was a major motive for the design and publication of several books. According to the aims of these course books, emphasis is rather given on students' language development through the presentation of novels and short stories than on their literary development.

### **Textbooks**

EFL textbooks can play an important role in the success of language programs. In fact, they are the realization of the processes of means specification in the curriculum planning. Sheldon (1988) suggests that "textbooks represent the visible heart of any ELT program". They provide the objectives of language learning; they function as a lesson plan and working agenda for teachers and learners. Cunningsworth (1995) argues that textbooks are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, and a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. He also contends that we should also ensure "that careful selection is made, and

Proceedings of The Research in Language Science

that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program."

Jin (1999) noted that ELT textbooks perform different functions. To him, a textbook is a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority and an ideology. Textbooks vary in their content and approach to literary treatment. In spite of the fact that EFL textbooks are expected to include literature of the target language, researches have shown that it is not always the case. The curriculum of a foreign language should include an insight into historical and cultural aspects of the relevant speech community in order to provide students with the background knowledge required to understand its literature. It has to be emphasized that knowing and training in one's own literature is necessary to read, understand and appreciate literature in a foreign language.

## **Methodology**

### **Materials**

Four English books have been developed for the four levels of high school in Iran. They are taught as English Book One, Book Two, Book Three and Book Four. The books have a similar structure and pattern. Each lesson starts with the 'New Words' section. The purpose of this section is to familiarize learners with the new vocabulary in the Reading Comprehension section. The second section of each book is the 'Reading' section, which is a set of reading passages followed by a number of comprehension questions. Grammar and writing exercises are the next sections. 'Language Function' is a section that is devised for conversation practice. 'Pronunciation Practice' and 'Vocabulary Drills' form the final sections of each lesson. Since the 'New Words' and 'Reading' are the central sections, this paper aims at the analysis of these two sections.

## **Results**

**New Words:** The 'New Words' section consists of 292 sentences. A large number of sentences have no reference to a target group in any way. These sentences are called No Reference because they are general and can be used by different people in different cultures. They usually start with unclear generic pronouns such as 'he, she, and they'. Some sentences refer to general categories such as 'students, children, doctors or so'. Book One is empty of culture-specific statement.



The Place of Literature In the Iranian .....

According to the study done by Aliakbari, seventy-eight percent of the sentences are general and culture free. In book one, from the 68 sentences only 6 items (1 percent) refer to cultural points. Only nine sentences (13 percent) refers to particular targets. Book Two has the similar condition to book one. In book two, there are 51 sentences in the 'New Word' section. Forty-two sentences (82 percent) are categorized as No reference, culture free. Only one case (2 percent) is culture specific reference. Six items (12 percent) are culture general reference. The number of culture specific statements is increasing in book three. In book four, eighty-one out of 96 sentences (85 percent) are recognized as No Reference Culture Free statements. It is clear that the books follow a similar orientation. No reference Culture General sentences make up the largest portion of the books (72 to 85 percent). The frequency of Culture Specific Reference sentences is growing from book one to four; however, this growing is too low to be considered. About eighty percent of the places named in these sentences are located in Iran. The name of the places in other countries is rarely seen [e.g.: Tabrize is in the North and Zahedan is in the South. (Book 3, p: 66)].

**Reading Comprehension:** The topics of readings vary from factual to anecdotal, and sometimes are funny stories. It is difficult to judge whether they are interesting or not for them. It seems that it would be better if the topics were updated to become more congruent with the taste of the new generation which might be a bit different from that of the authors who designed the books at least ten years ago. Nowadays, learners' needs are different from what they used to be and; hence it looks better to include texts more related to computer games, the internet, and satellite programs. For instance, it is possible to take and adapt some of the texts, words and jargon which are currently used in information technology. It is also possible to include adapted and simplified versions of quotations and sayings of scholars renowned for their wisdom in line with higher culturally valued objectives of education such as trustworthiness, sacrifice, courage, punctuality, patience, honesty, etc. the story of Oliver Twist in B2 attracts the students more than the story of a monkey known as Washoe. We should keep in mind that, as teachers, our responsibility is not imparting a handful of factual information concerning the grammar or meaning of a series of words and sentences in our classes; rather we should care for the transfer of cultural values to new generations.

Proceedings of The Research in Language Science

There are 29 passages in the four books. The trace of literature is seen in the topic of book two, lesson 7. It is mentioned that people around the world are greeting in different ways. But this text gives the examples of greeting which are similar to Iranian culture. More contrasting expressions could be introduced. In book two, two out of 7 readings (28 percent) include short stories. In this book, only 14 percent of the texts refer to different ways of life in other countries. Fifteen out of 29 passages (52 percent) are general texts related to science, biographies. Eight of the passages (27 percent) are reading passages whose identity has not left out. Passages with reference to non-English speaking western countries constitute only 10 percent.

### **Conclusion**

The major purpose of analyzing these textbooks was an investigation of their contribution to the improvement of students' literary competence. The results of the text books do not confirm such a quality. ELT text books in Iranian high school are not helpful in developing literary competence and cultural understanding. The data show that literary content in both 'New Words' and 'Reading Comprehension' sections are extremely limited.

Those of us who learned a foreign language through an exposure to its literature will always be willing to speak in support of its primacy and efficacy in foreign language teaching. This is to suggest that we have a deeper understanding of literature's positive impact on our affective and emotional dimensions. The prevalence of literary texts in FLL/SLL is better placed to examine the cultural, motivational and social dimensions that characterize/conceptualize our students' attempts to read and write.

Irrespective of the language or the literary works selected, an insight into the historical and cultural background needs to be provided to the students to understand and interpret literature of a foreign language. Just as much as language reflects the culture, traditions and beliefs of a society, literary works are as a mirror of society. The bond between literature and society is as strong as that of language and society and neither can be studied isolated from the other. Literature is an authentic source of language. 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'. Therefore more literary texts such as short stories, novels, poetry and newspaper articles

should be added to our English textbooks to expand and enrich the lives of our students and the society in which they live.

## References

- Aliakbari. *The place of culture in the Iranian EFL textbooks*
- Bernhardt, E. (2002). Research into the teaching of literature in a second language: What it says and how to communicate it to graduate students. In Scott, M. V. & Tucker, H. (Eds.), *SLA and the literature classroom: Fostering dialogues* (pp. 195-210).
- Carter, R. A. and Long, M. (1991). *Teaching literature*. Essex: Longman
- Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duff, A. and Maley, A. (1990). *Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Edmondson, W. (1997). *The role of literature in foreign language learning and teaching: Some valid assumptions and invalid arguments*.
- Jacobson, R. (1960). Linguistics and poetics. Reprinted in D. Lodge (Ed.) (1988) *Modern criticism and Theory: A reader* (pp. 32-57). London: Longman.
- Kelly, L. G. (1969). *25 centuries of language teaching*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Harlow: Longman.
- Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maxim, H. H. (2002). A study into the feasibility and effects of reading extended authentic discourse in the beginning German language classroom. *The ModernLanguage Journal*, 86, 20-35.
- McKay, S. L. (1986). Literature in the ESL classroom. In C. Brumfit and R. Carter (Eds.), *Literature and language teaching* (pp. 191-198). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McRae, J. (1991). *Literature with a small 'l'*. London: Macmillan.
- Paran, A. (2000). *Survey review: Recent works on the teaching of literature*, *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 75-88.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as exploration*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Schultz, J. M. (2002). The Gordian Knot: Language, literature, and critical thinking. In Scott, M. V. & Tucker, H. (Eds.), *SLA and the literature classroom: Fostering dialogues* (pp. 35-74). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.