

**Mediating Literature and Culture:  
In Search for an Appropriate Methodology in EFL Classroom**

**Smail BENMOUSSAT<sup>1</sup> and Nabil Djawad BENMOUSSAT<sup>2</sup>**

Faculty of Letters and Languages

Department of English

University of Tlemcen, Algeria

**Abstract:**

*The implementation of culturally-oriented teaching materials is one of the fundamental premises underlying our approach to foreign language teaching. This endeavour can be completed with the introduction of the literary component as a source for culture teaching. Worth noting is that literature was for more than a century one of the main avenues to the target culture. Regrettably, this was one of the arguments made in the 1950s against the abuses of the Grammar-Translation Method at the expense of Communicative Language Teaching. Today, many teachers still convincingly believe that language cannot be separated from culture. This belief indicates the extent to which culture teaching is viewed as a fifth skill. To this day, there are those who still question the rationale for including literature in foreign language instruction, and those who view literature as a source of developing cultural insights, therefore, insisting on its integration in foreign language classrooms, not least English Language Education.*

**Key words:** language teaching; culture teaching; cultural component; proponent's view; opponent's view

**Introduction**

It is widely recognized that a high level of language proficiency has to be coupled with knowledge, on the part of the learner, of the cultural aspects prevailing in the target community. For the well-informed and experienced language teacher, the concept of language teaching is systematically viewed in a symbiotic relationship to the concept of culture teaching. To teach a language without conveying impressions of another culture is obviously far from being possible; language teaching, in essence, involves in one way or another culture teaching. It is worth mentioning the existence of culturally-free teaching materials, in which the learners are made to identify themselves through the learning context employed, i.e. familiar patterns of their own culture. Many home-made ELT textbooks have intentionally been tailored to meet the mainstream culture in terms of needs, profiles and sociolinguistic environment. Indeed, what we are concerned with in this article is the connection between language teaching and culture

teaching. What is more, the use of two different headings reflects undeniably the importance of the cultural dimension in the language education. Yet, a wide range of literature on language-culture teaching basically reflects two antagonistic views. For methodological considerations, it would be wiser to start with the opponent's view and subsequently the proponent's one.

### **The Opponent's View**

The neglect of literature is justified on the basis that 'there is at present a high degree of uncertainty about the role of literature in a foreign language course' (Littlewood 1986: 177).

On the other hand, McKay examines three arguments against using literature. She posits "The most common ones [arguments] are the following: the first, since one of our main goals... is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. Second, the study of literature will contribute nothing to helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. Finally, literature reflects a particular perspective, thus on a conceptual level, it may be quite difficult for students" (Mc Kay 1986: 191). In the same vein, Hammerly (1982) dismisses literature as a source of culture teaching on the basis that the understanding of a literary work presupposes an understanding of the ethos of the target community.

Rivers (1981) plays down the role of literature in culture teaching. Although she does not dismiss it entirely and overtly, she warns us that "Even at the advanced level of study, students need to be aware that what they read in fiction does not necessarily depict in faithful detail the reality of life for every individual in the foreign country. The ordinary life of an average citizen rarely provides the specific elements sought by the writer of a novel, play or short story" (Rivers 1981: 336-7). Clearly, in culture teaching one of our objectives is to increase students' cultural awareness. Povey, in summarizing the aims of using literary texts, notes that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax" (Povey 1972: 87). Yet, it is worth asking the following question: Does linguistic knowledge entail cultural awareness? One would answer, "Yes, it does". To back up this idea, it is widely recognized that even 'cosmopolitan English' used in ESP contexts and which one is often assured to be value-free and neutral between cultures is far from being value-free.

### **The Proponent's View**

The foremost authorities on culture teaching, Nostrand, Seelye and Marckwardt, accord an important place to literature and make a strong case for it as a source for culture teaching in foreign language classrooms. Stern (1992) notes that the different literary genres have the power to evoke a quality of empathy and to develop the kind of understanding that is needed if we want

to enter into the thoughts, motives, and feelings of the foreign language speakers. On the other hand, Frye summarizes the benefit of using literature in the following way “So you may ask what the use of studying the world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good. One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance” (Quoted in McKay 1986: 193). On the other hand, the only argument McKay develops in favor of using literature is that “Literature may work to promote a greater tolerance for cultural differences for both the teacher and the student” (McKay 1986: 193). Questions of tolerance and cross-cultural understanding undeniably constitute the rationale of culture teaching.

To reinforce our adherence to those who advocate the integration of literature in foreign language classrooms, let us add Scott’s view on the issue, “We need not labour long over the assertion that literature is one of the most obvious and most valuable means of attaining cultural insights. It is an obvious means of acquiring cultural insights because literature, like an artifact, is typically a product of a given culture, and commonly functions as an inclusive model of that culture” (Quoted in Allen 1965: 293). On the basis of this quotation, one may think, there is no need to justify further the place of literature as a source for culture teaching. Such cultural insights will be attained only if they occupy as Marckwardt has rightly pointed out “a prominent place among the language course objectives and if some way of implementing them can be carefully worked out” (Marckwardt 1963: 1).

### **Littlewood’s Conceptual Framework**

Littlewood (1986) has provided a methodological framework for the teaching of literature in foreign language classrooms, and in which the literary text is not only viewed as a material to reinforce the learners’ knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but as a source of information about the foreign culture as well. The framework in question consists of five graded levels:

*Level One: Language as a system of structure:* At this simplest level, the focus is placed on instances of structures with grammatical analyses and explanations. In addition, exercises and drills may be introduced in order to transfer linguistic structures to the learner’s active repertoire. Littlewood views the language structures as the gateway or barrier to the other levels, and he assumes that it is fruitless to expect foreign language learners to read and appreciate foreign literary works for which they are not linguistically ready.

*Level Two: Language as a specific stylistic variety:* At this level, the language learner is initiated into the stylistic variations. Literature, then, becomes a means to portray the different stylistic variations of language such as formal written register, conversational style, informative style used in narration, poetic use of language and so on. The selection of literary texts for their stylistic appropriateness largely depends on the learners’ needs and proficiency level.

*Level Three: Language as the expression of superficial subject matter:* The learner, at this stage, shifts away from the language forms to the literary content. In this way, language becomes an artistic medium, i.e. it relates the events of a story or describes the scenes of a plot of a drama. The reader takes on the role of the 'onlooker'. But to fulfill this role, the learner should have an adequate knowledge of the cultural background. This knowledge (linguistic and cultural) helps him to come to terms with the view of reality which its native speakers take for granted in the process of communication, i.e. the native model, or what Stern (1992) calls the native speaker's perspective. In this respect, Littlewood points out "Literature is one amongst several means of access to foreign culture in the widest sense... Conversely, it is not possible to appreciate the created world of literature, unless the everyday cultural background has already become familiar at an earlier level of learning" (Littlewood 1986: 18).

*Level Four: Language as the symbolization of the author's vision:* At this level, the student tries to penetrate the author's vision and underlying theme. This level might provide, as Littlewood notes, a basis for 'generalizing' or 'theorizing'. The linguistic and cultural background acquired in the previous levels come into play to help the student to get to grips with the foreign cultural assumptions.

*Level Five: Language as a means of linguistic, social, or intellectual development of the foreign culture:* At this level, the student consciously or unconsciously, steps outside the work and places it in its context. Literature, then, becomes a source of facts about and insights into the foreign culture.

### **Widdowson's Conceptual Framework**

In a rather practical way, Widdowson views the relationship between the writer and reader in terms of interaction. In his view, "reading is regarded not as reaction to a text but as interaction between the writer and the reader mediated through the text" (Widdowson 1979: 174). This interaction involves two levels: linguistic and conceptual, i.e. reading as a process (comprehending) and as a product (comprehension). As a process, it necessitates the ability to interact with a text by decoding the linguistic complexity; as a product, by attempting to penetrate the cultural background. This is another way of saying that "the message in any text does not flow unimpeded, as a constant, from the writer to the reader, but that each individual reader must wrestle with a given text" (Harrison: 1990:45). Let us examine how a particular literary passage might be approached linguistically and conceptually. The following is a poem selected from William Blake's Songs of Innocence: *The Chimney Sweeper*. This poem is an example of a simple piece of poetry which poses no serious problems in terms of comprehending.

### The Chimney Sweeper

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry “ ‘ weep! ‘ weep!’ weep!’ weep!”  
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
That curled like a lamb’s back, was shaved; so I said,  
“Hush, Tom! Never mind it, for, when your head’s bare,  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair”.

And so he was quiet, and that very night,  
As Tom was asleep, he had such a sight!  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack,  
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;  
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,  
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;  
And the Angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy,  
He’d have God for his father, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,  
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.  
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;  
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

William Blake (1757-1827)

#### **Linguistic level:**

In the eighteenth century, small boys were employed to climb up the chimney flues to remove soot. Such boys, sold to the master sweepers by their parents, were miserably treated by their masters and suffered disease and physical deformity. They used to work from dawn to dark to earn their living. Their only hope was that they would be rewarded for their toil in the afterlife.

**Conceptual level:**

Though this poem is simple in form and visionary on one level, contrasting the misery of life on earth with the joy of the afterlife, it underlines the puritanical ideas of duty deliberately expressed by the poet in the last line. In the puritan philosophy, inculcating the principles of hardships and self-discipline, right from early childhood, is a form of worship strictly conforming to God's commandments. Exploiting innocent children and initiating them into hardships pay no scant attention to puritanical minds.

**Stanovich's Interactive-Compensatory Model**

In 1980, Stanovich developed the interactive-compensatory model. As its name implies, the model in question is both 'interactive' and 'compensatory'. It is interactive in the sense that the reader tries to make sense of what he reads by (1) making use principally of information which is present in the data, i.e. words/sentence recognition (bottom-up information processing) and (2) making use of his previous knowledge (top-down processing). This background knowledge, that is acquired through one's experience of the world is organized and stored in the reader's mind, is usually referred to as schemata<sup>19</sup>. Schemata, then, can be defined "As cognitive constructs or configurations of knowledge which we place over events so as to bring them into alignment with familiar patterns of experience and belief. They therefore serve as devices for categorizing and arranging information so that it can be interpreted and retained" (Widdowson 1983: 59).

Put simply, schemata are culture-specific patterns of background knowledge that enable us to guess and imagine the missing details. It is also compensatory in the sense "that a deficit in any language source results in a heavier reliance on other knowledge sources" (Stanovich 1980: 63). In other terms, as Bock (1993) notes if a reader's linguistic knowledge is weak at any one point, he will compensate this deficit by drawing on background knowledge and vice versa. Stanovich's model assumes that bottom-up and top-down processes are equally important. The interactive compensatory model provides useful insights for the teaching of literature. As a rule of thumb, Bock (1993) recommends five basis principles to be followed by teachers in order to capture these insights:

- 1) *Activate existing background knowledge* by relating the content of the text to the student's own cultural experiences. This previewing strategy allows students to reflect on and discuss what they already know about a topic that is of importance in the text to be studied. This encourages them to relate what they read to what is familiar and known. To ease the burden, "the reader must find a common schema with the author, who is trying to communicate by presenting the unfamiliar through overt or covert comparisons with the familiar in his own schema of the world" (Valdes 1990:28).

2) *Encourage prediction*. The predicting strategy allows students to formulate hypotheses about the text before reading commences. This strategy is a step further towards encouraging students to utilize what background information they possess and therefore arousing their interest in the development of the story. It does not matter if their anticipation based on schematic projection doesn't match with that of the writer. What matters most, in fact, is that they will be alert to what follows to see whether it matches with their predictions and expectations or not.

3) *Fill in background knowledge* where it is missing through explicit presentation of the socio-cultural context of the text. As a warm-up activity, it is highly recommended to present first the author's biography. The notes on the author's background may be helpful in many respects, not least the socio-historical context. Thus, "the reading of literature utilizes the cultural knowledge that one has accumulated, and adds further to that accumulation" (Valdes 1990:29).

4) *Make explicit, if necessary, the discourse genre of the text*, i.e. whether it is a novel, play or piece of poetry. The discourse structure, also called the organization of information, is different from one literary genre to another and within the same discourse genre. For example, poetry has its distinctive characteristics – patterning of sounds, words and sentences; the discourse structure of a narrative text is quite different from that of a descriptive one.

5) *Assist word and sentence level comprehension* through vocabulary exercises, i.e. figurative use of language such as connotation which is, in fact, an expression associated with the real world but which requires cultural awareness.

On the other hand, it is also recognized that at this level of comprehension, intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic awareness contributes largely to the development of vocabulary building which, in turn, increases the student's cultural awareness, for example, *dinner/lunch, (high)tea/supper* and *supper/dinner; The library is situated on the ground floor/The library is situated on the first floor*, are instances of intra-linguistic differences.

### **Bridging the Gap**

A group of teachers from the English Department of the University of Algiers have designed a book entitled *Bridging the Gap: language, culture and literature* (n.d.) which offers a helpful pedagogical method to deal with literary texts. The method in question consists of seven steps.

- 1) The WORDS AND PHRASES section provides explanations for archaic expressions, especially difficult words, phrases, idioms and unfamiliar syntax; or simply invites

students to look up in their dictionaries words and expressions which are essential for the understanding of the text.

- 2) The section entitled ABOUT THE AUTHOR, by allowing glimpses at the writer's biography and works will increase the student's motivation for reading and discovering more works by the same author.
- 3) The SKIMMING AND UNDERSTANDING section is designed to assess the students' comprehension of the text at a literal level before moving on to the stylistic study proper. However, this will have to be mediated through the activity that comes next.
- 4) EXPLORING THE CONTENT builds bridges between the culture in which the text is embedded and the students' own. Furthermore, by relating text to context, it makes the students more alert to the ironies, allusions, nuances contained in the text and thus prepares them for the next, and most significant stage.
- 5) With SCANNING: STYLE AND EFFECT, we come indeed to the heart of the matter. This is where the students lay the finger on the author's techniques and devices and evaluate their effectiveness. The short composition that completes this section is made to test their capacity to "absorb" the writer's style and comment upon it in a competent way.
- 6) GETTING TO KNOW THE GENRE treats the extract under study as a sample of the genre to which it belongs, delving into its formal features and metalanguage.
- 7) The FURTHER READING section is designed to gently nudge the students to read more works on the same theme in their entirety, and enlarge their experience of the Art and Life relationship, thus responding to the humanistic and universalistic appeal of literature.

As it is said, the pedagogical method adopted is recommended for the study of literary texts as part of a course in literature. However, our treatment of the literary text as a source of culture teaching needs to be purged of the metalanguage it contains. In this way, let us examine how a literary text might be dealt with gearing slightly the scheme to the requirements of a culture teaching approach. Let us analyze the following extract from Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, and which we have entitled *An offer of Marriage*:

### **An Offer of Marriage**

Hurrying to her husband, she called out as she entered the library, "Oh Mr. Bennet, you are wanted immediately; we are all in an uproar. You must come and make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins, for she vows she will not have him, and, if you do not make haste he will change his mind and not have her".



Mr. Bennet raised his eyes from his books as she entered, and fixed them on her face with a calm unconcern which was not in the least altered by her communication.

“I have not the pleasure of understanding you”, said he, when she had finished her speech. “Of what are you talking?”

“Of Mr. Collins and Lizzy. Lizzy declares she will not have Mr. Collins and Mr. Collins begins to say that he will not have Lizzy.”

“And what am I to do on the occasion? It seems a hopeless business.”

“Speak to Lizzy about it yourself. Tell her that you insist on her marrying him.”

“Let her be called down. She shall hear my opinion.”

Mrs. Bennet rang the bell, and Miss Elizabeth was summoned to the library.

“Come here, child”, cried her father as she appeared. “I have sent for you on an affair of importance. I understand that Mr. Collins has made you an offer of marriage. Is it true?”

Elizabeth replied that it was. “Very well- and this offer of marriage you have refused?”

“I have, sir.”

“Very well. We now come to the point. Your mother insists upon your accepting it. Is it not so, Mrs. Bennet?”

“Yes, or I will never see her again.”

“An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do.”

Elizabeth could not but smile at such a conclusion to such a beginning; but Mrs. Bennet, who had persuaded herself that her husband regarded the affair as she wished, was excessively disappointed. “What do you mean, Mr. Bennet, talking in this way? You promised me to insist upon her marrying him.”

“My dear”, replied her husband. “I have two small favours to request. First, that you will allow me the free use of my understanding on the present occasion; and secondly, of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be.”

Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813)

### Words and Phrases

**To call out:** to speak in a loud voice

**Mr. Bennet:** in the 19th century, husband and wives often addressed each other as Mr. and Mrs.

**To make haste:** to hurry

**To vow:** to declare emphatically

**Lizzy:** short form of Elizabeth

**Sir:** formerly children used to address their fathers as ‘sir’.

**As soon as may be:** as soon as possible.

### About the Author

Jane Austen (1775-1817) is famous English novelist. She was born in a family of eight children. Austen led an uneventful life in her peaceful village. Her major works describe the social life of the upper classes and all end in marriages, achieved after difficulties have been overcome.

### **About the Novel and the Text**

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet live with their five daughters at Longbourn in Hertfordshire. Mrs Bennet wants all her five daughters to marry and to marry well. When a rich young man comes to the village, Mrs. Bennet thinks he will make a wonderful husband... Mr. Collins, a clergyman, has made a proposal of marriage to Elizabeth and has been refused. Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth's ambitious mother, is horrified.

### **Skimming and Understanding**

1. Why was Mrs. Bennet horrified?
2. What did Mrs. Bennet tell her husband?
3. What was Mr. Bennet's reaction?
4. What questions did Mr. Bennet ask Lizzy?
5. How did Mr. Bennet bring the interview to an end?

### **Exploring the Context**

Jane Austen wrote at a time when England was undergoing important socio-economic changes brought about by the industrial revolution. These changes effected the lives and minds of the different social classes. Mr. Collins is in the eyes of Mrs. Bennet the ideal husband for her daughter Elizabeth. The text depicts a topic of social tensions through insights into personal relationships: marriage in traditional and modern contexts.

### **Scanning: Points for Discussion**

1. What sort of woman is Mrs. Bennet?
2. What sort of man is Mr. Bennet?
3. Was he impressed by his wife's dramatic account of Lizzy's refusal?
4. Did he approve the proposal of marriage?
5. Which of the two parents appears to you more modern and similar in attitude to a present-day parent?

### **Conclusion**

Many arguments have been made in recent years for including literary texts in EFL courses, though critics of the use of literature maintain that a piece of literary prose or poetry very often reflects a particular dimension which may be difficult for EFL students to grasp. Yet, the question is whether or not any benefit can arise from a study of the cultural assumptions of a piece of literature. In this vein, Kramsch clearly states that "More than any other text, it is said, the piece of literary prose or poetry appeals to the students' emotions, grabs their interest,

remains in their memory and makes them partake in the memory of another speech community” (Kramersch 2005:130).

To summarize, then this point, we have examined two conflicting views as regards the role of literature in culture teaching. One dismisses entirely literature on the basis that the cultural strangeness more than the technical difficulties poses the greatest problems and very often acts as a barrier between the reader and writer. The other strongly advocates the introduction of literature on the basis that it enhances the learner’s understanding of the cultural values of the target community which is part of acquiring true fluency in the language. We should admit, however, that literary texts offer several benefits to EFL students. Not only are they useful in developing linguistic competence, but also, in increasing students motivation to interact with a text, and ultimately increase their reading proficiency. What is more, our adherence to the Leavisian philosophy would lead us to claim that literature has a civilizing influence, leading to enlightenment. We do, also, claim that literature should be studied for a better understanding of culture and so may culture be studied for a better appreciation of literature. Finally, the key to success in using literature in EFL courses depends largely on a sensitive choice of texts and skilled teaching. We may add for the purposes of this argument that many literary texts studied in the English language curriculum provide outdated contexts and archaic expressions, which fall far outside the range of the native speaker’s verbal repertoire.

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