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The role
OF LITERATURE

*in the language
classroom*

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Summary

This is an essay about the role of literature in the language classroom. I will begin by commenting on the benefits of introducing our language learners to works of literature written in the target language. After that I will focus on the various approaches to this subject. Finally, I will suggest some activities based on “The Landlady” by British author Roahl Dahl before summing up.



Image taken during The Book Week at EOI Los Cristianos. April 2017.

Introduction

For years and years, the love of literature has driven people to want to learn a different language. The pleasure of rejoicing in their favourite authors in their original version was well worth the effort. On the path to entering a whole new fantasy world, countless avid readers chose not to get lost in translation.

Development

In this day and age, most teachers realise that literature favours language learning at many levels and that it enables access to a new culture. That is why it seems striking that literature is generally rejected in the language classroom. The main reasons for this objection are: some literary works are complex and inaccessible and the language sometimes deviates from convention. Also, the planning of activities around literature usually demand quite a lot of imagination on the



part of the teacher and on the students alike. Nevertheless, the benefits clearly outweigh the drawbacks. To start with, reading benefits the learner's linguistic development. A book is swarming with new words, expressions, structures and an array of collocations and combinations that appeal to the reader's long-term memory. On top of that, there is the connection between literature and culture. It goes without saying that reading enhances one's cultural competence. Interestingly, many expressions that are used in English today have their origin in literature. A poster posted by a twenty-year old girl is raging on the Internet. It shows a collection of sentences like "not sleep one wink" or "wear your heart on your sleeve" which we use today and which we owe to Shakespeare. Other authors, such as Lewis Carroll, have contributed to the richness of the language by spreading idioms that were already in the language, but which were made popular through his books. The character of The Mad hatter in Alice in Wonderland, for instance, impersonates and gives a whole new dimension to the expression "mad as a

EXTRACT FROM THE LANDLADY BY ROALD DAHL

Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup. Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him—well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital? "Mr Mulholland was a great one for his tea," she said at length. "Never in my life have I seen anyone drink as much tea as dear, sweet Mr Mulholland." "I suppose he left fairly recently," Billy said. He was still puzzling his head about the two names. He was positive now that he had seen them in the newspapers—in the headlines. "Left?" she said, arching her brows. "But my dear boy, he never left. He's still here. Mr Temple is also here. They're on the third floor, both of them together." Billy set down his cup slowly on the table, and stared at his landlady. She smiled back at him, and then she put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortingly on the knee. "How old are you, my dear?" she asked. "Seventeen." "Seventeen!" she cried. "Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I'm sure he was, and his teeth weren't quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that?" "They're not as good as they look," Billy said. "They've got simply masses of fillings in them at the back." "Mr Temple, of course, was a little older," she said, ignoring his remark. "He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn't told me, never in my whole life. There wasn't a blemish on his body." "A what?" Billy said. "His skin was just like a baby's." There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup and took another sip of his tea, then he set it down again gently in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else, but she seemed to have lapsed into another of her silences. He sat there staring straight ahead of him into the far corner of the room, biting his lower lip. "That parrot," he said at last. "You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window from the street. I could have sworn it was alive." "Alas, no longer." "It's most terribly clever the way it's been done," he said. "It doesn't look in the least bit dead. Who did it?" "I did." "You did?" "Of course," she said. "And have you met my little Basil as well?" She nodded towards the dachshund curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realised that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved. "Good gracious me," he said. "How absolutely fascinating." He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa. "It must be most awfully difficult to do a thing like that." "Not in the least," she said. "I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?" "No, thank you," Billy said. The tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds, and he didn't much care for it. "You did sign the book, didn't you?" "Oh, yes." "That's good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I can always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr . . . Mr . . ." "Temple," Billy said. "Gregory Temple. Excuse my asking, but haven't there been any other guests here except them in the last two or three years?" Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile. "No, my dear," she said. "Only you."

Roahl Dahl, 2009. The Landlady, Penguin electronic edition (p.4-5)



hatter”, which is said to have originated in the madness hatters typically suffered due to the exposition to toxic products. The literary work helps to extend and maintain the cultural value of the expression.

Another point worth noting is that all language is literary to some extent. There is no clear-cut distinction between literary and non-literary language. As the Irish dramatist Oscar Wilde puts it: Life imitates art, far more than art imitates life (Oscar Wilde, 1889). It seems to me that life is a synonym of nature and that language mirrors nature, almost involuntarily.

The last reason for teaching literature in the language classroom is that it connects with people. The literary work appeals to “the universals”, that is, the things that move us and that we keep inside. That is why I got immediately hooked on Anna Karenina, when I first read Dostoyevsky’s novel, despite the fact that I had never been to Russia. If we are to follow Krashen’s language acquisition theories, in which the subconscious plays a vital role, then literature should be a must.

Once we have made up our minds that we are going to start bringing the books into the classroom, I suggest we pick the approach that best suits our needs. According to Carter and Long (1991), the three main methods are: The cultural, the language, and the personal growth model.

“It is the least practical of the three models, as it offers little opportunity for extended language work”

The cultural model relies to a large extent on the context (historical, socio-political, and so on). It is the least

practical of the three models, as it offers little opportunity for extended language work.

The language model, on the contrary, enables learners to access a text in a systematic and methodical way. This approach lends itself to the repertoire of strategies used in language teaching: creative writing, role play, prediction and a variety of exercises orchestrated by the teacher. It denies the cultural competence, so in a way it spoils the fun of reading.

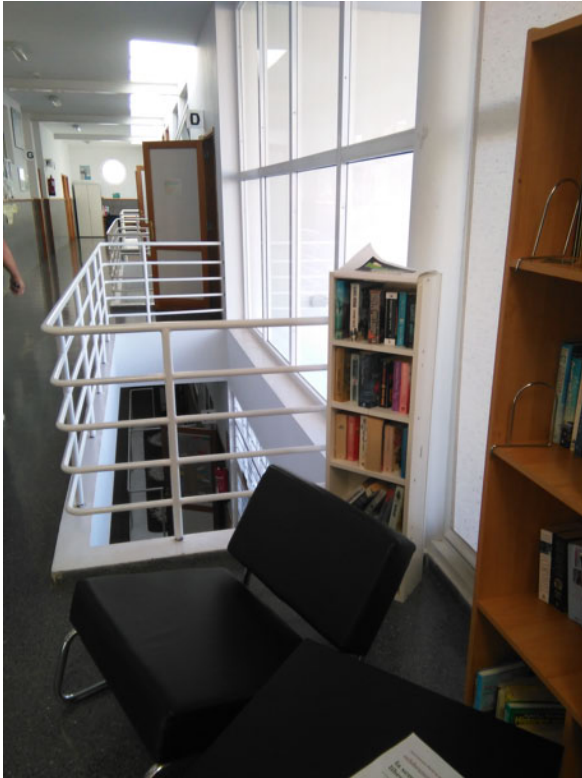
Finally, with the personal growth model, learners are encouraged to express their opinions, feelings and to relate the text to their own vision of life and to their experiences. As Cadorath and Harris point out “text itself has no meaning, it only provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader’s own experience” (1998:188). This model attempts to bridge the cultural model and the language model by focusing on the particular use of language in a text, as well as placing it in a specific cultural context.

My own view on the matter is that, whatever method we choose, the goal should be making literature accessible to learners and beneficial for their linguistic development.

I have chosen an extract from a short story called The Landlady in order to provide a practical example of the use of a literary text in the language classroom. It was written by the British author Roald Dahl in the first half of the 20th century. It is a short story, and its main aim is to entertain and amuse the reader, as well as to scare and create suspense.

The text is about a young man who lodges at a guest house run by a strange old lady. During his first evening in the house they have a conversation and the young man starts making a series of connections leading to the

conclusion that something fishy is going on in that guesthouse. The story sends shivers down our spine, and the author manages this through a skilful combination of characterization, the use of the senses, pauses, and the choice of vocabulary in the story.



Permanent book corner in EOI Los Cristianos.

From the very beginning of this extract, we are presented with two distant characters: the old lady and the young man. Then she brings Mr Mulholland and Mr Temple into the conversation. The names strike him as being familiar, and then he remembers having seen their names in the newspapers. Also, they seem to have similar characteristics to Billy, the young man in the story. When the lady tells him that they are still in the house he starts to feel uncomfortable. To make matters worse, he then finds that the parrot he saw from the street is actually dead. The same applies to the dachshund; the lady

tells him she practises taxidermy. As she puts it: I stuff all my pets myself when they pass away. The scene leaves us wondering about the young man's destiny, as all the living creatures who stepped in the house before ended up stuffed. The relationship among the two main characters seems to be governed by social convention. In a way, Billy finds details that incline him to think that the lady is a killer, however, he still complies with social convention showing interest in her businesses. Whenever the conversation reaches an awkward moment, he changes subject or pauses, as if he were afraid to appear rude.

Due to its great variety and wealth, this literary text has a wide range of possibilities for exploitation. The activities I suggest are designed primarily for the Advanced 2 Level of the Official School of Languages.

The first idea: that comes to my mind is what I would call: Inner voice role play. We all have an inner voice that tells us something about the other person when we are in a conversation with somebody. However, we tend not to listen and, out of politeness, say something different from what we really think. The two characters in this text reflect this view of speaking according to social convention. It would be interesting to bring attention to the way in which our words do not reflect our inner voices. Thus, we bring sociolinguistic factors, such as social conventions and norms of politeness into our classroom.

In this activity, two students play the role of the landlady and Billy. They read the sentences literally with the right intonation, signalling turn-taking and pauses appropriately. At the same time, two other students, standing behind each of the main characters, act out as their inner voices, voicing what they

