

Literature in the Language Syllabus*

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In accepting the request to talk to you on the topic of Literature in the Language Syllabus, I hardly expect to be able to offer you anything very new or original. It is an old conference battlefield, across which charges and counter charges, shot and shell and even, I suppose, the polemical equivalents of bows and arrows and atomic bombs have been launched by one side or the other. It is one of those topics, too, in relation to which many participants at conferences attend more closely to the opinions in their own heads than to the words coming out of a speaker's mouth (unless that is, the words support the opinions), and it is partly for this good reason, I take it, that the topic figures on the agenda for this conference. Almost anything I say is likely to find supporters and attackers – those who say 'Of course that's obvious' and those who mutter 'Nonsense, he can't know what he's talking about'. I recall a line from a poem that sometimes fits: "And those behind cried 'Forward' while those in front cried 'Back'."

In essence the argument reduces to contending views about a number of questions deriving telescopically, each from the one coming before it. "Should there be a literature component on the F.L. course?" "What should be taught?" "In what way?" "Starting when?" It is not hard to see that these questions mask others which relate not simply to professional or pedagogic opinions but also to philosophical standpoints. A: "Should there be a literature component in the EF curriculum?" B: No. A: "What? Are you a philistine? Have you no interest in culture? What about civilised values? The humanist tradition? etc. etc." Charge and counter charge, shot and shell follow. Put that way, the questions are masking questions—other of some significance are hidden by them.

On the whole, older or more conservative teachers—unless they have grown cynical or disillusioned—support a literature component; on the whole the younger or more radical, though not all or only these, are prepared to drop it. But it is not a question merely of age or convention. Let me try again. On the whole those who take a utilitarian, survival-kit, English-for-Occupational-purposes, "realistic", 'Let's-face-it—we're-wasting-our-time' view of EFL are prepared to drop a literature component from the curriculum: while those who view language teaching as a part

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of Education; who take an “if-you-have-to-read-you-might-as-well-read-something-worthwhile, it-will-do-no-harm-and-might-do-a-lot-of-emotional-and-intellectual-good” view; who feel language can put the learner in touch with great men and women of the past and not only with present-day users—these support a literature component. And already you will have noticed why I referred to such questions as “Should we teach Literature?” “What Literature should we teach?” etc. as masking questions. Arising from them are attitudes to the topic which may derive not solely from a balanced and unprejudiced view of the task and purposes of EFL but also from one’s age, from one’s place on the EFL “political spectrum”, from one’s view of the students’ aptitude and ability, from a teacher’s modernity and familiarity with the latest developments, from a humanist, or ethical or positivist, inclination, and no doubt from combinations of different beliefs, impulses, hunches, past teaching experience, recollections of school-days etc. etc.

From all of those let me select these opposed pairs: Age v. Youth; or Conservatism (or traditionalist) v. radical; “educational” v. utilitarian, and Literature with a capital L as opposed to literature with a small ‘l’. I propose to consider my topic in relation to these opposed pairs, though I am quite aware that other pairs could be selected in place of those I have mentioned. My hope and intention is to *discuss* the topic impartially rather than to be dogmatic or authoritarian in propounding views. But I might as well apologise in advance to those who will feel I have failed, for, in truth, it is almost impossible to discuss and give opinions about an educational question without taking sides to some extent. Indeed, even by identifying the topic as an educational question (instead of some other kind of question; methodological, or linguistic perhaps) I take up a particular stance towards it.

Before I take up the first of my opposed pairs let me say a few words about a point of obvious relevance that is no doubt in the forefront of many people’s minds. And this concerns the learners themselves. When I talk of a literary component in the EFL course I have in mind a learner who learns a foreign language at school, say between the ages of 12 or over to about 18. If he or she begins earlier than this the literary component, if present, will probably be rather different in kind. And I shall also have in mind the university student. The adult who knows that he wants tourist English, or secretarial English, or hotel keeper’s English or any other variety of English for an occupational or specific purpose, can be left to decide for himself what he or she wants to buy. Some, as we know very well at the British Institute, want, in fact, to buy a conducted venture into literature: dramatic, poetic, fictional and non-fictional. They work hard, read very widely, have the most animated discussions about the works they read—at which opinions of all kinds are attacked and defended—and, indeed, participate in that

collaborative activity which is 'literary' criticism; for I take it that collaboration is as much a matter of disagreement as of agreement.

But it is not these genuine amateurs of English with whom I am concerned today, though I cannot leave them without wondering how they would have arrived at where they have if someone, somewhere, had not made provision for them to have access to a foreign literature. I am concerned, broadly, with the State-provided curriculum in the senior-school years and at the English departments of universities.

Let us return to the first of the opposed pairs, which was, you recall, Age v. Youth. When I studied French at school (other friends studied Spanish, and other still German, and some did Greek, and all of us studied Latin) there is no doubt that the objective of our studies—rarely attained alas!—was to acquire some sort of first hand acquaintance with French literature. Our teachers spoke the language—they had spent time abroad among native speakers during their studies—and we went on a school trip for a couple of weeks to France where after a faltering “Est-ce-que... Est-ce-que vous pouvez...” at the start, we mostly shut up. Back at school we went on with our lists of words which formed their plurals in ‘aux’, and conjunctions followed by the subjunctive, and translations and dictations and compositions. Our teachers took us—largely by stumbling class-reading and translation—through plays by Moliere and Racine, through a selection of verse from the Romantic poets—of which I now remember only two titles and one opening line—and a novel which we read in class at a rate of a page or two a week, and consequently never had time to finish! Switch English for French in this account and it is probably the experience of a Thai or Malaysian or Chinese learner.

Was it all a waste of time? The elderly say No, and point to the interest in French art and history and—a good point—French cinema, which many derived from the old smattering which stuck to the more able. The young, and the young of that time who underwent this form of instruction, are and were horrified at the waste of time involved and wished that more effort had been spent on teaching students how to use the language. I wish it too, but I can't help wishing also that I'd understood more of the poems and plays we “dictionaryed” our way through. More language skill might have helped me there, though 20th century colloquial everyday French isn't perhaps, the best approach to 17th century French Literature. The question indeed is what kind of skill? More French grammar and vocabulary (or code and lexicon) but also more “knowledge of the way they could be put together for different purposes—what today we speak of as registers and rhetorics. For what it's worth, my own residual feeling towards a Literature and grammar-based course is one of wistful regret that I never got farther than I did with a Literature I've enjoyed since in translation. And I might as well forestall questions about translation here, since we are considering courses for students of

the foreign language. You will recall Robert Frost's definition of Poetry as being that which is left out when you translate a poem from one language to another. Or Roy Campbell's remark that Translations (like wives) are seldom faithful if they are in the least attractive! Anyway I shan't be talking about translation.

On the question of Old teacher and Old attitude, or Conservative, as opposed to Young teacher and Radical attitude, then, the judgment I would make is that there was much to be said for the intention of teaching the foreign Literature in a course but, unfortunately, it was an intention seldom realised because it was linguistically unprepared for and hence unattainable. The young are right to aim at a realisable objective. Either view carried too far—'No literature, only useful language'; or 'never mind spoken language, equip yourself to read the greatest literary achievements in the language', seems to fall between two stools, and its adherents to be stupidly rigid. Our best response, perhaps, is—may I say it?—to stall between two fools, and refuse to commit ourselves to sloganeers. Times have changed, continental and intercontinental travel is cheap and commonplace. Though Latin and Greek studies could lead the student into a rich literature—which is why they exerted so much influence on the teaching of modern languages—they couldn't equip us to talk and socialize with Latins and Greeks who had left the scene 1400 years ago.

Which brings me to the next pair: educational v. utilitarian. For a long time we have been told about the distinction between knowledge and skills, and between those subjects at school which lead the student to know something as compared with those which teach him to know how to do something. Geography and History are 'know' or 'know about' subjects. Playing the guitar, dancing, woodwork, embroidery, drawing and EFL are know-how-to subjects.

Today, in the era when the Council of Europe is very much concerned to produce a syllabus which will define the topics and associated notions to enable a learner to manage in a foreign country, or to communicate at a basic level with a foreign visitors to his own country; when the functional use of language for basic social and communicative purposes is taken to be the greatest need of the mass of learners; when experts spend years defining the minimum attainments required for these purposes—known as the Threshold level—when "What do I get out of it? What use will it be to me?—are perhaps rightly assumed to underlie any learning effort called for—in a time like this, where stand Shakespeare, Cervantes or Flaubert, and all the rest of the writers who constitute a national literature?

The answer, or course, is that they stand where they have always stood, as representatives of the greatest achievements of their respective civilizations, approachable and comprehensible only through a sensibility to, and command of, the special language use in which they exist for us. To be able to read them and respond to

them is to be able—is it not?—to move outside and beyond one's limited individual experience and to reflect upon the nature of the human experience at large through the mind and feelings of genius. To comprehend their work, even shallowly, enables us to be more fully human, more widely sympathetic to, and aware of, the potentialities of the human condition. And more than this even, it offers a particular and unique form of pleasure and satisfaction, a non-material moral, spiritual and intellectual enrichment. Well yes, perhaps. But these are large claims in abstract terms and they may seem to be very remote from the activities of a language class. I put the point in these terms deliberately, however, to focus attention on the wider educational aspects of language study as opposed to its humbler utilitarian aspects. Not many students achieve such satisfaction even in their mother tongue. How much more difficult to get even a glimmering of it in a foreign language! Are we not back at the position of my reported school-day experience—leading little horses to wells too deep for most to drink from? Well, frankly, yes we are. So, however desirable, is it not a waste of time even to assert the educational value of such study in a foreign language? Perhaps not, for literature, viewed as a special use of language, is perhaps more approachable by the foreign language teacher than literature viewed as a set of extractable morals or faded paraphrases in translation.

This brings me to the third of my contrastive pairs, what I have called literature with a large 'L' as contrasted with literature with a small 'l'. Large 'L' literature here means the major works of the major writers. Shakespeare's plays, the poems of the great poets, the famous novels. Literature with a small 'l' refers to language used for literary purposes; that is, the way any writer of prose or verse—great or humble, major or minor—finds himself compelled to manipulate English in order to express his, or her, personal feelings and views as related to some aspect of life which matters sufficiently to impel an attempt to put it into words. Large numbers of people, at some time or another, feel this urge to communicate such feelings. Who here has never tried to write a poem or short story? And when someone does try to do this he or she finds that they have to use the resources of the language in a special way. You don't write poems in the same language that you use for letters, or committee minutes, or lectures. Yet, of course, one uses language. Now, in what way is this language different? How are its meanings, its communicated messages, given verbal forms different from those used for other purposes? I suggest that if EFL students are given the opportunity of studying this special use of language they will learn something about other, more frequent uses of English, and at the same time they will be led towards an essential basic understanding of what literature is about.

Ten to twenty years ago we were commonly told that language was basically the spoken form, and that this was formed from an arbitrary series of contrasting sounds. The sounds themselves had no significance until they were joined into

individual words. Words were joined to form longer stretches, arranged and formed in certain ways according to a code which made up the grammar and syntax of the language. And certain words were without meaning in themselves but were vital in relating other words or groups of words one to another. In the great days of Fries and Lado at Michigan a simplified explanation of how English worked became current: it worked through the order of words (The man killed the lion versus the lion killed the man) the forms of words (kill, kills, killed, lion, lions, man, men, etc.) and through a finite list of function words (at, to, from, the, whose, etc.).

This was an elegant and satisfyingly simple explanation of the code, the grammatical signalling aspects of English. However there were always other aspects which remained and which are of interest to my theme. Suppose some sentences started softly with the sussurating sounds of hissing 's's'. Or suppose that final phrases frequently finished with 'f's'. The 's' and 'f' sounds here have no particular significance, but, coming together, they do draw attention to themselves when spoken. Again, suppose a man named Wood wished to dismiss his female servant in anger and a friend named Noah trying to reason with him says: "But wouldn't you miss her, Mister Wood? and gets the reply "To hell, no, Noah! I know her too well". Or someone says: "I went to buy a leather bag that seemed to match my new red dress." Or, "The trouble with Mary is that she's so stout, always eating and drinking and never going out."

What I'm pointing to here, of course, are the accidental combinations or frequencies of sounds and stresses which can sometimes occur in language. These aspects of language can be said to be *latent* or *potential* patterns, quite apart from the patterns which grammar imposes. Let me repeat:

I went to buy a leather bag
that seemed to match my new red dress.

and then think of the beginning of Wordsworth's "Daffodils":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
that floats on high o'er vale and hills.

or the next

The trouble with Mary is that she's so stout
Always eating and drinking and never going out.

compare

The poplars are felled, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonade. (from poem of C 18
by Cowper)

By selecting from normal speech rhythms one can impose either accidentally or deliberately a special pattern which is latent in the language. Sounds can follow similar potential combinations and produce rhyme. The regularity and number of

stressed and unstressed syllables can produce different metres. The repetition of similar sounds can produce a slightly comic effect: "Suppose some sentences started softly with the sussurating sounds of hissing 's's'" or

*To sit in solemn silence, in a dull dark dock
In a pestilential prison with a lifelong lock
Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block.*

or think of the games and tongue twisters that delight children in every language, e.g. Peter Piper. 'Dandon dina dit on du dos d'un dodu dindon'.

There are two things that arise from these obvious examples. The first is that they are fun. They amuse, they make one smile. The second is that they set the native speaker thinking of similar accidental aspects of his language. All children go through a period when puns, words of similar sound but double meaning, are enormously attractive. Similarly they enjoy rhythmic rhymes in skipping games and choosing rituals—the method of choosing who shall be on one side or another. Hundreds of jokes depend upon word-play: puns, riddles, tongue twisters (Try saying quickly three times, Peggy Babcock). Children are always having to stretch the language they know to its limits to express themselves, or else they invent new uses. This gives us a very good reason for including a literature component in a language course, namely that sensibly approached it can offer a pleasurable relief from the traditional language activities. I mean by a literature component literature with a small 'l'—stories, poems, word games (limericks and even nursery rhymes if appropriate) that relate to the experience and imaginative grasp of the class but need not be particularly good, or by famous writers.

In the second place such material can be used to reveal the way in which language—as-literature, or literary discourse, involves patterns and uses which are different from textbook in English and derive from a deliberate activation of the latent elements I have mentioned. Certainly, unless the EFL student develops an early familiarity with the kind of use to which language is put for literary purposes he won't readily be able to respond when he attempts more advanced literary works. And since that use is different from other uses the obvious approach is through comparison.

This has been the case for many years with English for native speakers. Some of you here may recall the excellent book Professor Cleanth Brooks produced in the 1940's called something like *Understanding Literature*. In it he has a passage from an examination of a witness in court. It is a transcript of a genuine passage. Following that he has a newspaper account, with quotations from the transcript of the same examination. And that is followed by a play featuring a courtroom

examination. The differing modes, with their differing communicative purposes, are very clearly illustrated by placing them in comparison one with the other.

Today this sort of contrastive study is generally called stylistics, and I would especially draw your attention to a short book by Professor H G Widdowson called *Stylistics and The Teaching of Literature* (Longmans 1975). Widdowson says :

“An understanding of what literature communicates necessarily involves an understanding of how it communicates ; what and how are not distinct. It is for this reason that literary works cannot be satisfactorily paraphrased or explained by any single interpretation The basic problem in the teaching of literature is to develop in the student an awareness of the what-cum-how of literary communication and this can only be done by relating it to, without translating it into, normal uses of language.” (p. 70).

He then offers a series of exercises and suggestions as to how literature might be taught to EFL students, basing his choice of example and comment on the way literary discourse creates language patterns different from the patterns of grammar. So the study of these patterns becomes the study of literature since, in poetry obviously, they operate to give meaning over and above the dictionary meaning. As I have tried to indicate, in verse the patterns can arise from sounds—alliteration, rhyme—from unconventional grammatical usages, from syntactic and lexical patterns forming metre and rhythm.

In prose the same patterns are still there, but there are added further larger ones, harder to see, and for which a different approach is needed. Opening paragraphs, descriptions, dialogue, narrative methods, the identification of theme and its realisation in the story will all help the student to see how fiction operates, how the larger patterns develop. Drama is easier with its constricting brevity and the consequent forced choice the writer faces of focusing on a moment or moments out of a lengthier period. The dialogue is not in the least like real conversation, the linking passages from one focus to another are easy to identify, the mini—and major climaxes recognisable. But drama and fiction are more similar in European languages than poetry, and verse has also the virtue of offering numerous short examples of various quality which are excellent for the teacher's purpose.

I began by posing three contrastive pairings related to the question of inserting a literature component in the language syllabus. The traditional v. the radical: the educational v. the utilitarian and major works of Literature v. minor

ones. I found that I sympathised with the intention of acquainting the student with literature in the language studies only if enough language could be got into the student's head to get some benefit. For the most part EFL classes have been concerned with teaching how language works, its grammar, rather than how it is used to communicate different sorts of messages. We are all becoming accustomed to the idea that different uses of English are required to create the appropriate discourses, of which the literary is one. It seems plausible, at least, that the extension of language study to include some acquaintance with this form of discourse will not only give students a better grasp of the English language and prepare them to encounter intelligently a variety of written forms, but also prepare those going on to higher studies for the literary element there. It is therefore both educational and utilitarian. And as regards the question of what should be studied, literature with a large 'L' or with a small 'l', I conclude that it is best to proceed from the simple to the more complex. Significant literature expresses adult emotion and it is best not to anticipate it before the student is ready.