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LAURA SABRINA DA SILVA BURGOS

**LITERATURE: A BOOSTER IN THE PROCESS OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS A
FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Recife

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EXAMINING BOARD

Profa. Dra. Eva Carolina da Cunha (Supervisor)

Federal University of Pernambuco

Profa. Dra. Simone de Campos Reis (Examiner)

Federal University of Pernambuco

Abstract:

The teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) has long been a subject of interest among educators worldwide. While various approaches and methods have been developed, the potential role of literature in the language learning process has often been overlooked. This paper aims to investigate materials that highlight the benefits of utilizing literature as a valuable resource in TEFL classrooms, by drawing on the perspectives of prominent scholars such as Krashen (2004), Brown (2007), Nunan (2003), Elliot (1990), Hall (2016), Kusanagi (2015), and others. As a result, it was observed that literature, when integrated effectively, can enhance language acquisition, motivate learners, and foster meaningful communication. By engaging students on a personal and emotional level, literature provides opportunities for improving language proficiency and cultural understanding. The development of further research and discussions are necessary to promote a greater recognition and appreciation of literature within TEFL instruction, an area with enough capacity to improve the performance when learning foreign languages.

Keywords: literature; language learning; English language teaching.

Resumo:

O ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira (TEFL) há muito tempo tem sido um tema de interesse entre educadores em todo o mundo. Embora diversas abordagens e métodos tenham sido desenvolvidos, o potencial papel da literatura no processo de aprendizado de idiomas frequentemente tem sido negligenciado. Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar materiais que destacam os benefícios da utilização da literatura como um recurso valioso nas salas de aula de TEFL, recorrendo às perspectivas de estudiosos proeminentes como Krashen (2004), Brown (2007), Nunan (2003), Elliot (1990), Hall (2016), Kusanagi (2015), etc. Como resultado, foi observado que a literatura, quando integrada de maneira eficaz, pode aprimorar a aquisição de idiomas, motivar os alunos e promover uma comunicação significativa. Ao envolver os alunos em um nível pessoal e emocional, a literatura proporciona oportunidades para melhorar a proficiência linguística e a compreensão cultural. O desenvolvimento de pesquisas adicionais e discussões é necessário para promover um maior reconhecimento e apreciação da literatura no ensino de TEFL, uma área que pode, de fato, melhorar a performance na aprendizagem das línguas estrangeiras.

Palavras-chave: literatura, ensino de línguas, ensino de língua inglesa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a foreign language in schools has long been a topic of interest and concern for educators around the world (Nunan, 2003). While there have been many approaches and methods developed over the years, the role of literature in the teaching process of the target language has often been overlooked. Despite its potential as a valuable resource for improving language proficiency and developing cultural understanding, literature is not always given the attention it deserves in English language classrooms. Rather, it is seen as an end (in which students with enough proficiency levels would be able to finally access

literary texts) when it could be used as a tool throughout the process and help learners to improve their proficiency level.

Krashen (2004) has argued that studying literature in the process of learning a new language can be highly beneficial. According to the author, exposure to literature can enhance language acquisition by providing learners with comprehensible input, motivating them to engage, and offering opportunities for meaningful language use. Reading literature in the target language can help learners to develop their language proficiency in a way that is both enjoyable and effective, he argues.

Also, Brown (2007) suggests that literature can be used as a tool to help learners develop their language skills in a meaningful way by engaging them in authentic and purposeful communication. He states that literature can be used to teach vocabulary, grammar, and language functions in context, while also providing opportunities for learners to explore cultural aspects of the target language. The author emphasizes the importance of choosing appropriate texts that are accessible and relevant to learners' interests and language abilities — this aspect of adequate textual choice will be more thoroughly explored in an upcoming session.

However, one of the main reasons why literature is not given the attention it deserves in English language classrooms is the assumption that it is too difficult and too irrelevant for students to engage with. Yet, scholars like Michael Clay Thompson (2001) and Louise Rosenblatt (1978) have argued that this is not the case. Both scholars have their own methodologies that prove the previous statement wrong.

Thompson's methodology focuses on language arts, including literature, to develop critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. He believes that the study of literature can help students understand language and culture. In his trials, students were exposed to various literary texts, and Thompson encouraged personal and emotional engagement to appreciate the power of language and express themselves better.

Similarly, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading values the reader's personal response to a literary text. The meaning of a text is created through the transaction between the reader and the text, while students engage with literary texts on a personal and emotional level.

Considering the panorama put forward, the following question arises: “How does the teaching of English as a foreign language through literary texts impact the students' learning?”. Another correlated question guided this investigation: “How can teachers use literature to promote learners' engagement and motivation in the learning process since the

students get involved with it on a personal level?’’.

Thus, after investigating the main benefits of utilizing Literature within English classrooms to facilitate the process of acquiring the target language — considering what has been studied and discussed so far by important scholars and researchers, such as Krashen (2004) and Brown (2007) — this paper aims to propose a greater recognition and appreciation of literature as a valuable resource for English language learners, by helping educators develop more effective and engaging strategies to teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). This investigation may contribute to enhancing the quality of TEFL instruction and the overall language learning experience of learners.

In this context, to ensure the success of this investigation and to achieve the objectives, this study has employed a bibliographical analysis that enabled the collection and analysis of a wide range of existing literature on the topic (books, articles, theses, etc.), while also providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation through the collection of rich data.

Firstly, a brief examination of how teaching languages through literature was perceived in earlier studies has been carried out. Subsequently, we took a closer look into more current conceptions, which view literary texts as allies in this process. Additionally, it was conducted a comprehensive exploration of the most current debates and conversations surrounding the use of literature as a tool to assist foreign learners in acquiring the English language. All of these criteria guided the process that aimed at answering the research questions that were previously mentioned above.

This analysis will not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the benefits and limitations of using literature to teach English as a foreign language but it will also help draw insightful conclusions and implications from the findings. The aim is to provide an extensive, informative, and nuanced discussion that will advance the ongoing discourse surrounding TEFL.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH LITERATURE: FROM GRAMMAR TOOL TO CULTURAL EXPLORATION

Over the years, the teaching of the English language through literature has undergone significant changes. Early approaches viewed literature as a mere tool for teaching grammar and vocabulary.

In the book "Literature in the language classroom", written by Joanne Collie and Stephen Slader (1987), the authors discuss the inaccurate view that many scholars and teachers used to have on using literature for language learning purposes. One of the main arguments for the lack of usage of this resource is that the literary language would be unreal and distant from everyday communication, or, as they mentioned:

Not so many years ago, there seemed to be a decisive swing against literature in English as a foreign language. The emphasis in modern linguistics on the primacy of the spoken language made many distrust what was seen as essentially a written, crystallised form. Literature was thought of as embodying a static, convoluted kind of language, far removed from the utterances of daily communication. Because of this it was sometimes tarred with an 'elitist' brush and reserved for the most advanced level of study (Collie and Slader, 1987, p. 4).

Unfortunately, until nowadays some professors have the same opinion as those from decades ago, as they still see literature as an *end* that is only available to advanced language students, as mentioned previously in this work.

However, this approach was challenged by scholars such as Jeremy Harmer (2015), who argued in his book "The Practice of English Language Teaching" that literature should be used to teach language in a more meaningful and communicative way. Harmer advocated for using literature as a source of authentic language, providing opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, cultural exploration, and language production, as did other researchers such as Krashen (2004) and Brown (2007) in other studies.

For Stuart Hall (2016), the study of literature was not just about understanding the content of the works themselves, but also about understanding the social and historical contexts in which they were produced. For this author, cultural practices, including literary texts, are not neutral but rather shaped by the social, economic, historical and political contexts in which they are produced. He also believed that literature can provide insight into the beliefs, values, and struggles of different societies and cultures, and that it can help us to better understand ourselves and our place in the world. So, in other words, in addition to obtaining tools for learning a new language, the student also has the opportunity to learn about new cultural and social ways of thinking and acting in the world through literature.

Therefore, by demystifying literature as something elitist or only irrelevant for foreign language learners, it is observable that while the language in question will indeed be learned, it will also be possible to provide cultural values and knowledge to the students — that are essential for effective communication in foreign language — which is part of the civic education for which teachers are also responsible for.

In short, even though Hall (2016) did not specifically focus on teaching literature, he believed that the study of culture, including literature, was important for helping students to develop a critical understanding of the world around them, and to better understand their own place in it.

Similarly, Abdellah Benhadda (2017), in his article "The Role of Literature in Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages", claims that literature can contribute to language learners' personal and social development. He asserts that "[...] reading literature is not just about acquiring linguistic competence, but it is also about gaining cultural awareness and a deeper understanding of the human experience" (Benhadda, A. 2017, p. 7). This perception is equally supported by many other scholars who argue that literature provides a window into the cultural and social realities of a language community.

Custodio and Sutton (1998, p. 20) expound on the transformative power of literary works, which have the ability to broaden horizons, incite curiosity, foster connections, and encourage exploration among students. In essence, literature offers an unmatched wealth of genuine content across diverse registers. By cultivating proficiency in literary analysis, learners can effectively absorb the language at an advanced level, says Elliot (1990, p. 198). Literature not only serves as a tool to enhance their written and oral language skills in English, but also provides a gateway into the cultural aspects associated with the language, thereby nurturing cultural proficiency among learners.

3. SELECTING THE APPROPRIATE LITERARY MATERIAL FOR ENGLISH CLASSES

Using literature as a teaching tool in English language classrooms offers numerous benefits for language learners. Careful selection of appropriate materials is crucial to ensure that students do not imitate archaic language styles from past centuries. The objective is to engage students with literature in a way that enhances their language skills and cultural understanding, not to literally reproduce what is found in classical masterpieces, for instance.

When selecting literature for English language teaching, educators should consider the language proficiency levels of their students to ensure effective learning. Graded readers, simplified versions, or modern adaptations of literary works are particularly useful for beginners or those with lower proficiency levels. According to Nuttall (2005), these materials allow students to engage with authentic literature while maintaining the essence of the original work, using language that is accessible and incorporating contemporary vocabulary.

Nuttall (2005, p. 73) also highlights the significance of graded readers in language teaching, emphasizing their value for beginners and lower-level learners. Graded readers provide simplified versions of literary works, enabling students to engage with authentic literature at a level that matches their language proficiency. By utilizing these materials, language learners have the opportunity to experience literature while taking into consideration their linguistic abilities and gradually expanding their language skills.

Furthermore, teachers should choose literary works that reflect the interests and cultural backgrounds of their students or, at least, a text in which they can relate to, by grasping relevant information and creating personal involvement. Contemporary novels, short stories, or poems that tackle relevant themes can captivate learners and facilitate meaningful discussions. Similarly as Hall (2016) commented, by connecting literature to students' personal experiences, they are more likely to engage actively and develop a deeper understanding of language, culture, and critical thinking skills.

In short, by carefully selecting materials that, at least, align with students' language proficiency levels and personal interests, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that fosters language development without inadvertently leading students to imitate archaic styles. Striking the right balance between engaging texts and proficiency goals is vital to help learners appreciate literature while enhancing their English skills in a meaningful and relevant manner.

3.1 THE ROLE OF NON-CANONICAL LITERATURE IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

It is important to notice that the availability of literature that explores contemporary themes and challenges holds tremendous pedagogical value, as it resonates deeply with the lived experiences and concerns of today's youth. By integrating such texts into the curriculum, educators can establish a vibrant learning environment that encourages students to actively engage with diverse narratives. Connors and Shepard (2013) argue that incorporating young adult literature (YAL), which addresses the intricate realities of the present time, can be especially beneficial for adolescents and struggling readers, as they can easily relate to the themes and characters portrayed in these works. This not only captures students' interest but also enables them to critically examine and reflect upon the world around them. This way, literature becomes a vehicle for self-reflection.

By presenting a variety of literary genres and perspectives, language instructors can

facilitate a deeper understanding of the English language while simultaneously promoting cultural awareness and empathy. For instance, novels like John Green's "The Fault in Our Stars", a literary phenomenon, allow students to forge emotional connections with the characters and storylines, prompting meaningful discussions and fostering a genuine appreciation for the power of language. The novel in question ignited a global reading frenzy among young audiences, serving as a gateway for countless individuals to embark on a lifelong passion for books. It struck a chord with readers, captivating their hearts and minds with its emotional depth and relatable characters. The book's exploration of love, loss, and the complexities of life resonated deeply, luring young readers who may have previously been uninterested in literature.

These non-canonic works have not only gathered immense popularity, but have also expanded their reach through film adaptations (such as the Harry Potter series), comic book adaptations, and Internet games, appealing to audiences of all ages. These developments hold significant implications for the incorporation of literature into language education.

Reflecting on the value of literature, Nietzsche's (1989) assertion that 'We must recover the seriousness of a child at play' resonates. It is possible to relate this assertion with the enjoyment of a captivating story or poem that holds immense seriousness and intrinsic worth. It engages readers in imaginative and pleasurable encounters with language, stimulating their intellectual and emotional faculties. By embracing these pleasurable uses of language, educators can harness the power of literature to enhance language education and foster a deeper appreciation for the written word.

In addition to addressing contemporary subjects, it is crucial to strike a balance by also including classics in the curriculum. These timeless works provide a historical and cultural context that enriches students' understanding of literature and language. Nonetheless, young adult literature, for instance, can also serve as a bridge in which the teacher would practice the scaffolding technique to introduce canonical literature and its themes through these well known modern texts, as Ribakova and Roccanti (2016) mentions:

Whether through the practice of bridging or the use of a reading ladder, this gradual introduction of theme, plot, or genre characteristic through a text that students are more motivated to read allows for an easier, scaffolded transition into the canonical text (p. 35).

Also Lesesne apud Ribakova and Roccanti (2016) suggested that "the best way to begin to scaffold is by using a book that 'has already found a connection to a student'" (p. 48). An illustrative example of this approach, provided by the mentioned authors, involves

introducing "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka, a historical canonical work centered around the theme of peculiarity, using the 2016 novel "Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children" by Ransom Riggs. Throughout the story, Kafka explores the concept of "otherness" and how society treats individuals who deviate from societal norms or expectations, sending them to imminent fear and isolation, as well as Riggs with his peculiar children who only find shelter and understanding in the home of Miss Peregrine, a falcon-like woman who cares and protects the kids against monsters who try to eliminate them. The relation between these two texts provides fertile ground for discussions about who gets to decide what normality and peculiarity are, for example.

Similarly, another book that is worth relating to a historic masterpiece, as Ribakova and Roccanti (2016) suggest, is "Looking for Alaska", another John Green's book from 2005 that "[...] speaks very realistically and truly to high school students and their interactions and lends itself to conversations about grief and suicide prevention" (p. 40). In this novel, the authors continue, it is possible to observe an interesting relationship between the theme portrayed in it and the play "Death of a Salesman," by Arthur Miller (1949). Both works explore profound issues related to life, death, and identity, each in their unique context.

The first fosters a very important topic that could be addressed more often in schools, that is the suicide prevention. In this plot, the teenager Miles experiences his coming of age while having to deal with the death of Alaska, a very good friend of his which likely committed suicide. In a similar vein, "Death of a Salesman" follows the life of Willy Loman, a struggling salesman, whose dreams and identity are shattered by his pursuit of the American Dream. It also sheds light on the repercussions of societal pressure and the quest for success, providing an opportunity for discussions about mental health and the impact of expectations on individuals. Both works, in their distinct ways, open up significant themes for contemplation and reflection, emphasizing the importance of addressing critical issues in society.

In conclusion, by combining both modern and classical texts, teachers can create a comprehensive and well-rounded language learning experience that connects students to the past while equipping them with the tools to navigate the complexities of the present.

4. READING CIRCLES: UNVEILING THE PROFITS OF LITERATURE-BASED DISCUSSIONS IN ENGLISH LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In the realm of English language education, literature, according to what has already been exposed, serves as a strong resource for engaging learners and fostering language acquisition. Among the various strategies that utilize the power of literature, one effective approach stands out: the implementation of reading circles. Reading circles possess the remarkable ability to forge an environment where students are given the opportunity to immerse themselves in profound and thought-provoking conversations centered around the literary works they have explored. Within these circles, learners are encouraged to express their insights and interpretations, creating a space that fosters intellectual growth and meaningful exchanges. It is within these conversations that the true power of reading circles shines, as students engage in critical thinking, develop their analytical skills, and refine their ability to articulate their ideas with clarity and conviction.

However, for these benefits to be accomplished, it is certainly necessary that the teacher provides not only the adequate tools as well as the adequate guidance. It means that the educator must provide the means for the discussion so it can happen effectively. By proactively initiating topics and offering insightful suggestions, the teacher plays the role of the facilitator, which draws upon Vygotsky's (1978) ideas to guide discussions, incite thought, and scaffold students' learning experiences.

According to Lev Vygotsky's (1978) contributions, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) represents the space between a learner's current level of ability and their potential level with proper guidance. He claims that by identifying each student's ZPD and guiding discussions with enlightening suggestions, the teacher provides the necessary support to promote better and effective learning experiences. This approach allows students to collaboratively explore new concepts and construct meaning through social interaction, optimizing their cognitive development.

Similarly, Kusanagi (2015, p. 213) points out that students “need to be provided with opportunities to actually use English rather than just study it, that is, to become ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’ English users”, emphasizing the necessity of opening the learning environment to 'out of the box' horizons, in which the learning process can happen in multiple ways, and preferably, active ones, such as the reading circles, dramatizations, role-playing, storytelling or story writing, etc.

Furthermore, another interesting fact that is important to highlight is that critical thinking skills also flourish within the reading circle space. As students explore the complexities of the target literary piece, they are prompted to analyze characters, examine plot developments, decipher underlying themes, and evaluate literary techniques. Engaging in

thoughtful discussions with their teacher and classmates nurtures students' analytical and evaluative abilities, enabling them to think critically about the text and engage in intellectual exchanges with their peers.

In conclusion, through these interactions, learners are able to improve critical thinking abilities, while it extends beyond the realm of literature and becomes a vehicle for cognitive development, once they are exposed to a wide range of language structures, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and stylistic elements found within this rich environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in this research are in line with previous studies that highlight the benefits of using literature in foreign language teaching. The findings support research that emphasizes the potential of literature to promote student engagement, stimulate creativity, enhance language proficiency, and broaden cultural understanding. In a world where people are constantly stimulated with multiple information such as social media and Internet, it has become increasingly crucial for educators to find alternative ways to ensure students are fully engaged and enthusiastic participants in their English classes, and make the learning process as entertaining as it can be.

As we observed, the traditional teaching methods that have been operating in our system for such a long time, tend to focus on grammatical, listening and speaking skills that do not reflect the students' interests. By using literary resources, specially the ones that the students already have gotten in touch with, educators can have the power to transform the learning experience into something actually as effective as satisfying. Beyond having authentic content, literary works have the power to construct far more than only vocabulary skills — it provides the students with thought-provoking experiences and intellectual growth.

Finally, as we draw this study to a close, we envision the conclusions we have reached carving fruitful paths within the teaching community. It becomes evident that literature, far beyond its role in sharpening students' written and oral language abilities in the target language, serves as an illuminating window that opens wide into the very essence of the culture it represents; thus, nurturing a cultural competence within the hearts of our students. With this understanding, educators can pave the way for a more holistic and enriching language learning experience, where linguistic proficiency intertwines with a deep appreciation and connection to the diverse cultural aspects of the target language.

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