



Introduction to the Special Issue: Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom

RESEARCH

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How to tackle the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a topic that has generated much academic research as well as social interest, given the necessity for non-native English speakers to learn the language so as to access better jobs, gain more educational opportunities, and have more advantages in our careers, not to mention the usefulness of English when travelling abroad or pursuing other personal interests. With the rise of public bilingual schools in Spain, for instance, how to make our students fully competent users of English is an issue that, outside academia, has sparked hundreds of journalistic articles as well as talks in TV programs, not to mention debates among parents about the effectiveness of these programs.

As teachers of EFL with dilated professional careers at various levels (Primary and Secondary school as well as in university undergraduate and graduate programs) and solid research backgrounds in Literary Studies, the contributors of this volume sought to explore how we can use literary texts in order to enhance our students' English skills, not only in regards to reading. In our search for new teaching strategies to develop our students' performance in English while providing them with tools that will serve them in their future careers and lives, we turned to the use of literature.

The use of literature in the EFL classroom is very limited in practice (Fernández de Caleyá Dalmau et al. 218), despite the intense debate that this issue has generated (Muhammed 27). Consequently, the articles in this special issue come to fill a gap in scholarship. We propose that the use of literary works must not be solely restricted to undergraduate students majoring in English Studies, where literature occupies a central place already, or to undergraduate students majoring in Primary Education Teaching (where literature is typically a one-semester subject in their four-year course of study). Instead, we propose that when teaching EFL we can successfully resort to using literary texts to engage our students in a more effective way, fostering a love for reading as well as promoting their reading skills, among others.

Certainly, the use of graded readers, either original texts or adaptations of classical works of American and English literature, has for long been a feature of EFL. The approach of the contributors to this volume is different in that we propose reading the actual literary work, without adapting it, for classroom discussion and use. The use of authentic texts is therefore one of our starting points.

Because literary texts are perceived as "one of the most challenging kinds of material for English classes" (Keshavarzi 554), their use is often discouraged despite the vast number of benefits that incorporating them to our teaching practice can bring. Among other benefits, we could list raising cultural awareness, the promotion of reflective thinking (Keshavarzi 554, 557), language enrichment (Alemi, 178), and personal growth (Fernández de Caleyá Dalmau et al. 220-221). Another reason to discard literary texts is because of the misperception that English

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teaching is related to linguistics almost exclusively, rather than to literature (Alemi 177) and that teachers should concentrate on the four skills—listening, reading, speaking and writing (Muhammed 35).

Students' potential reluctance to literary works has often been mentioned as a reason to discourage teachers from its use but students may have a positive attitude. Nevertheless, in a study dealing with the introduction of literature in EFL classrooms among Taiwanese EFL senior high school students, Tseng found that “most of the participants held a positive attitude towards the literary works introduced in class” (61). It is the first-hand experience of the contributors of this volume that our students can benefit from using literature in the classroom if it is shown in a positive manner.

We strongly disagree with assessments such as the one made by Ferradas, who argues that literature “has little practical application, is often closely connected with a specific cultural context, and it can be idiosyncratic, even subversive” (qtd. in Keshavarzi 555). Provided that literary texts are carefully selected having in mind the students' English level (Bagherkazemi and Alemi 7–8), literature can improve our teaching as well as students' learning.

Almudena Nido Hernández and Rosa María Díez Cobo in “The Use of Gothic Fiction as a Second Language Teaching-Learning Motivational Input for Adolescents” capitalize on the fascination that Gothic fiction generates on younger students to provide motivational input. Motivation in learning any subject is important, but it is particularly crucial in learning a foreign language, as this is a process that takes a number of years, marked by ups and downs and periods of fast progress at the beginning and slower progress once students reach higher levels. Motivating teenage students may be even harder than grown-up learners of English who have career goals in mind, as teenagers see the future as distant and remote and are not quite certain as to how their competence in a foreign language is going to be an asset for them in years to come. Building on Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter theory, among others, the authors select Gothic fiction, a central genre in English literature, because some of its features are particularly appealing to teenage students. Suggested works are Edgar Allan Poe's “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The use of these texts can promote classroom discussion about what constitutes a monster (or how one is created), about the differences between how we are and the image we project (which is a very current topic related to the dichotomy between our social media presence and our real lives), and about vengeance or identity issues.

Olga Fernández Vicente in “Creating Life-long Readers Using YA Literature as a Bridge to the Classics” explores how we can approach Young Adult (YA) Literature to teach English. The novelty of this article lies in that, while using YA literature is a rather extended practice, Fernández Vicente proposes the use of YA literature as a means to help our students subsequently approach classic literary works (which they may find much more daunting). Building on the work *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges Between Young Adult Literature and the Classics* by Herz and Gallo, Fernández Vicente advances how this connection between YA literature and classical literary works will allow our students to develop their reading abilities, relating, comparing and drawing parallels between the elements of classic works and youth literature. Fernández Vicente does not limit her case to just English-language literature (proposing James Joyce's *Ulysses*) but also tackles Spanish literature thanks to the comic book adaptation of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*) by the Spanish dramatist Federico García Lorca.

In “Reviewing the canon: Teaching Chicano literature in the bilingual classroom,” Beatriz Jiménez Villanueva proposes using Chicano literature. Chicano literature is well-known among literary scholars and most English Studies programs regularly feature Chicano authors in the syllabi of literary courses (with many offering courses solely devoted to Chicano literature). But students of EFL who are not English majors might not be familiar with the term “Chicano” or with the main authors. For instance, Martel-Robaina and Gómez-Galisteo proposed introducing *The House on Mango Street* (1991) by Sandra Cisneros to support immigrant students of late entry in the Spanish educational system at high school level (133). Jiménez Villanueva uses Chicano literature to create cultural awareness and foster biculturalism as well as bilingualism,

proposing a number of texts for the reading activities outlined in the article, such as the aforementioned *The House on Mango Street*, *I Love Saturdays y Domingos* (2002) by Alma Flor Ada, *Los Gatos Black on Halloween* (2006) by Marisa Montes, *The Rainbow Tulip* (1999) and *Water Rolls, Water Rises* (2014), both by Pat Mora or two collections of poems by Francisco X. Alarcón, *Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems* (1999) and *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems* (1997).

Shipwrecked survivor Robinson Crusoe has long been a household name even beyond English-speaking countries, and a very productive character for EFL discussion to introduce the use of the second conditional—what would you do if you were Robinson Crusoe, what would you take to a desert island with you? Dolores Rueda Montero supplies him with an indispensable tool in her article “Robinson Crusoe with a Cellphone.” Building on the popularity of the character created by Robert Louis Stevenson, she uses *Robinson Crusoe* as didactic material. Rueda Montero capitalizes on our students’ dependence on technology and their (perhaps excessive) fondness for the use of cell phones to make them familiar with the adventures of *Robinson Crusoe* and using English in the process. She makes use of a task-based approach, engaging students with a number of activities that they need to successfully complete.

In their article, Alexis Martel-Robaina and M. Carmen Gómez-Galisteo propose using *Twilight*, the first installment in Stephenie Meyer’s vampire saga (comprising five novels and six blockbuster movies), as a starting point for students to reflect on gender roles and gendered perceptions and the reliability (or lack thereof) of first-person narrators. By reading a novel in which the protagonist is a teenage girl who feels misunderstood and isolated, instructors can address their students’ similar feelings of teenage *angst* and alienation. While *Twilight* has been celebrated by (especially American) conservative groups who celebrate its advocacy of premarital celibacy, others have raised alarms. A cause for concern is the controlling (and one may even say abusive) behavior displayed by the male protagonists/the love interests of the female protagonist. This article, instead, uses the novel to boost the students’ self-confidence or their perception of themselves, in a positive manner, fostering positive images for our teenage students.

Using a variety of texts, from more canonical works of literature to young adult novels, the contributors to this volume expect to offer suggestions and prompt discussion using literature to help our students in the learning process of English. We very much hope that this volume is a starting point for a more systematized and consistent use of literature in the EFL classroom.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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