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Learning with Literature
in the EFL Classroom



Introduction: Learning with Literature in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract The aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive, in-depth and state-of-the-art introduction to literature learning in EFL contexts, with equal attention to both theoretical and practical concerns. Indeed, this volume includes contributions focusing on a wide range of literary genres, different age and ability groups, new topics for literature learning alongside the tried and tested, and with many suggestions for the future of the field. Moreover, the different articles aim to facilitate access to and to provide in-depth information on topic-relevant issues. In the 18 contributions, present-day challenges for literature and language learning are discussed in the light of current theoretical debates. Finally, a balance is sought between theory and practice in order to constructively combine state-of-the-art theoretical input with practical work in the classroom. As for its addressees, this book has a varied readership in mind, comprising language teachers, university students and academics.

1 Volume Rationale

Literature learning in EFL can look back upon a long history. Initially, such learning was focused on canonized texts (e.g. William Shakespeare, the Romantic poets, fiction by Charles Dickens or George Eliot) with the learner treated as a mere recipient of expert knowledge. Following the pedagogical practices of classical philology, translation was the preferred method to approach literary texts in language learning. With the advent of reader response in literary criticism and the communicative approach in language pedagogy, the learner's role was redefined as a co-creator of meanings, and in ELT attention was drawn to the communicative possibilities inherent in literary texts and literature-related tasks. With the (inter)-cultural turn this focus has widened to invite engagement with the socio- and intercultural dimensions of literature and language learning. Recently, the advent of the new media, a broader definition of what constitutes literature, new socio-cultural challenges, and the inclusion of neglected reader groups have shifted attention to multimodal texts and tasks, transcultural and global issues, books for children and young adults, and to primary and lower secondary learners as readers of literary texts.

As for recent developments in theory building, a shift has taken place from 'theory to post-theory'¹ in both literature and language teaching. Whereas in the past different theories vied with each other for superiority over other positions, a post-theoretical stance aims to combine different perspectives. Such a stance is anything but a-theoretical, and its predilection for theory mixing stems from the belief that the complexities of literature and language learning demand a multi-perspectival approach. Moreover, such a position is still informed by a principled theoretical foundation. In this volume the foundation for teaching and learning literature is provided by a concept of reader response criticism which pays equal attention to texts and their respective readers, that is to say to the communicative acts performed by both. At the same time, power-critical, intertextual, form-focused, performative and multimodal perspectives are taken on board. Thus, the communicative possibilities and constraints of text-reader/learner relationships can be discussed in the light of new socio-cultural and educational challenges. Indeed, a similar trend can be noted in theory building concerning language learning. A good example is the book by Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada *How Languages are Learned* (2006). Here, a case is made for a communicative orientation. Yet, in line with post-theoretical approaches this orientation also includes behaviorist, innatist and cognitivist perspectives to offer teachers a rich repertoire of approaches to meet the specific needs and interests of specific learner groups in specific learning contexts. Summing up, the present volume is post-theoretical in approach with a particular focus on literature and language as communication.

This volume is informed by a liberal humanist understanding of literature and language learning. In other words, literature is seen as a potentially empowering discourse which can help learners develop creative abilities, critical thinking and empathy for other people. We are aware that such a position is controversial, considering the harsh criticism of liberal humanist concepts as put forward by proponents of power-critical or post-structuralist perspectives. A post-theoretical approach, however, does not ignore or deliberately exclude such criticism. Instead, liberal humanist perspectives have been redefined in the light of such comment. As a result, such criticism has led to a more ambivalent understanding of literature, and it has sharpened awareness of the socio-cultural shaping of human beings (cf. Delanoy 2002; Said 2003). At the

1 The terms as used here go back to Franz Kuna's unpublished manuscript *The Death of Theory? From Theory to Post-Theory*. In this text Kuna refers to recent debates in literary criticism where such a shift has become noticeable.

same time, it must be stressed that there is an increasing amount of empirical evidence that literature can indeed foster critical thinking and empathy for other people. Alexa Weik von Mossner (2014: 4 cont., 14) refers to the work of cognitive psychologists (e.g. Antonio Damasio and Joseph Le Doux) and experts in affective narratology (e.g. Colm Hogan) who have pointed out that the vivacity and the emotional appeal of literature can trigger strong emotional responses in readers and influence their understanding of themselves, others, and the world in critical and empathetic ways. Such a position links back to the approach suggested by Lothar Bredella (2012: 69), who emphasizes the potential for cognitive and affective learning from literature in ELT contexts.

In the past 30 years the concept of literature has undergone significant revision in English Studies. According to Peter Widdowson (1999: 37), a distinction can be made between *Literature* and *literature*. For Widdowson “literature exists independently” whereas “Literature is only created by criticism”. In other words, it lies in the power of the institutions concerned with literature to include/exclude and also to privilege certain textual practices. In line with a post-theoretical perspective, the concept of *Literature* has certainly become more inclusive of different practices. Thus, literature written for children and young adults has found its way into critical debates in literature didactics and academic literary criticism. Furthermore, multimodal texts and film have also been taken on board. Similarly, in English Studies perspectives formerly dominated by a focus on the United States and the United Kingdom have been complemented by the New English Literatures, coming from places as diverse as Australia, Canada, India, Kenya or Malaysia, and from writers with multicultural affiliations. Such developments have opened up a wealth of new possibilities for literature, language and cultural learning. It has shifted attention to new addressees (children, young adults) and their learning needs and interests. In addition, the range of opportunities for cultural learning has increased significantly. Also, such development is indicative of the dynamic and open-ended character of this concept of *Literature*. To capture this dynamism, the present volume also goes beyond the current understanding of *Literature* by extending its scope of interest to practices (computer games) so far excluded from such discussion.

Summing up, this volume is informed by a post-theoretical perspective with a particular emphasis on the potential for communicative learning offered by literature in EFL. Moreover, a concept of literature is advocated which is inclusive of different text types, open to different reader/learner groups, and dynamic in composition. This concept goes clearly beyond what used to be perceived as the core cultures and literatures in English Studies.

2 The Contributions in this Volume

This volume is structured as follows. Starting with a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework underlying this book, the focus then shifts to the main literary genres (poetry, narrative texts, drama), which are discussed in terms of different age groups, ranging from primary to upper secondary levels. As for the text-types covered and the learner groups considered, a developmental perspective is suggested starting with picture books, continuing with more demanding children's literature and texts for young adult readers, and finally leading up to complex literary works. For all these levels a variety of learning tasks is discussed including creative, performative and analytical approaches to literature. Moreover, the focus is on a wide range of Anglophone cultures and their literatures. Finally, some perspectives are introduced which go beyond current practices in literature learning in EFL. These practices include plurilingual approaches to literature learning, and texts (e.g. computer games) which have not previously been discussed as literature.

In the first part theories informing the present volume are introduced. In *Literature Teaching and Learning: Theory and Practice* Werner Delanoy presents an approach which dialogically links up reader-response criticism with approaches as varied as stylistics, narratology, ideology criticism, and intertextual studies. Moreover, a practice-oriented model is suggested to highlight the communicative conditions active in ELT learning contexts. Finally, a short-story project is discussed to connect the theories portrayed with classroom practice. In the following contribution, *Literary Literacy and Intercultural Competence: Furthering Students' Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes*, Laurenz Volkmann shifts attention to certain aspects which go beyond or are only marginally addressed in the first article. In his contribution, intercultural competence models are combined with models of developing literary literacy to show how literature can help develop linguistic, cognitive and attitudinal capabilities in language learning contexts. As for his choice of practical examples, Volkmann uses a multimodal text (a cartoon) and a poem to metonymically draw attention to the wide range of text types available for literature learning. Indeed, the first two contributions should be read as complementary, that is to say, together they aim to provide a comprehensive and differentiated introduction to the field.

In the second part of this volume the focus is on literature learning at primary school level. In *A Picture (Book) is Worth a Thousand Words: Picture Books in the EFL Primary Classroom*, Margit Hempel highlights the potential of picture books for developing literary and visual literacy plus communicative competence in the language classroom. Moreover, she emphasizes the

cognitive, emotional and motivational possibilities which picture books offer to young language learners at primary level. This essay is followed by Janice Bland's *Performing Poems in the Primary School*. In her article, Bland makes a case for a holistic approach to language and literature learning which is both pleasurable and educational in orientation. She provides a wealth of concrete examples which also show how lexical patterns and grammatical categories can be internalized through memorizing poems.

The following section charts the transition from primary to upper secondary levels. In *Poetry in the Intermediate EFL Classroom*, Carsten Albers takes a particular interest in the years following primary education. Albers distinguishes lower, middle and higher intermediate levels, for each of which he defines linguistic, literary, cognitive, emotional and creative learning aims. He illustrates his approach using three well-known poems which speak directly to these age groups, combining cognitive approaches with creative and individualized tasks to explore the methodological possibilities suitable for intermediate-level learner groups. This contribution is followed by *Teaching Young Adult Fiction* by Frauke Matz and Anne Stieger. Their article documents how the genre of young adult fiction has developed in the past 30 years and how teachers can be aided in their choice of suitable texts. Moreover, the authors highlight the possibilities this genre offers for developing competencies such as perspective taking, empathy or transcultural awareness. Also, suggestions are made for scaffolding the learning processes with the help of learner-centred tasks and product-oriented approaches. This section then continues with Carola Surkamp's *Playful Learning with Short Plays*. She makes a case for an action-oriented teaching approach to bring texts alive in the language classroom. With the help of three short plays, she shows how drama activities can enhance language, literary, social and cultural learning at early and middle intermediate levels. With her drama-based approach Surkamp introduces a concept of language learning which is also focused on paralinguistic means of expression. Finally, Peter Freese's concern is teaching narrative competence through American short stories. Because of their brevity and the genre's diversity, short stories have played a significant role in the history of literature learning. Peter Freese himself has contributed in no small part to this history, and in his article he reintroduces his well-known and widely used analytical toolkit for analysing short stories (first published in 1976) in the light of new concepts focused on developing narrative competence. The literary texts discussed target a more advanced learner audience, thus creating a bridge between this and the following section.

In this following part the focus is on upper secondary levels, and, for this learning context, literature is discussed in connection with specific literature- and

culture-related topics. In *Why Read a Shakespeare Play in Class?* Rüdiger Ahrens highlights the past and present significance of Shakespeare's works. Useful background information on the Tudor world, Shakespeare's English, and the Elizabethan stage is also given to raise the learners' historical awareness and to facilitate entry into the world of Shakespeare's plays. This article is followed by Peter Freese's comments on the American Dream, which has been a favourite topic in ELT since the late 1970s. In his article Peter Freese includes texts of historical interest (e.g. Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* [1908]), as well as a plethora of contemporary texts. His choice of texts spans canonized literature (e.g. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*) and pop songs written and performed by artists as varied as Frank Zappa, Bruce Springsteen, Puff Daddy, Bad Religion or the Casting Crowns. By doing so, he suggests a wide-reaching concept of Literature and creates links to learners' textual preferences.

Whereas in these two essays there is a focus on what used to be the core countries in English Studies, i.e. the UK and the USA, Maria Eisenmann shifts attention to other Anglophone locations including Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, New Zealand and parts of Africa. In *Crossovers – Postcolonial Literature and Transcultural Learning*, she gives insight into the conditions for and dynamics of postcolonial development in the areas of culture and literature. Her main focus is on concepts of cultural hybridisation as suggested by postcolonial critics and constructed in postcolonial literary texts. According to such concepts, postcolonial writers, because of their migration routes and multicultural affiliations, can no longer be tied to one location and culture. As an illustrative example for classroom use, she discusses a poem by John Agard, a writer born in Guyana to a Caribbean father and Portuguese mother, who at the age of 18 moved to the UK, where he has lived ever since. Eisenmann's interest in capturing English Studies in its more global dimensions is taken up and further expanded in the following contribution. In *Opportunities and Challenges for Transcultural Learning and Global Education via Literature*, Laurenz Volkmann makes a case for addressing current global issues through literary texts. For Volkmann global education requires learning approaches which can prepare students for living with a diversity of life concepts without overlooking the commonalities which bind people together across cultural, historical, and generational gaps. Finally, Frauke Matz supplies a concrete example for global education in literature learning. In *Alternative Worlds – Alternative Texts: Teaching (Young Adult) Dystopian Fiction* she shows how this genre has developed over recent decades, and how in its contemporary realizations it addresses issues of global significance such as environmental destruction, genetic engineering, or the silencing

of critical citizens. Frauke Matz illustrates how contemporary dystopian novels written for young adult readers can invite critical thinking and active engagement with the issues portrayed.

The final section focuses on new approaches to and future perspectives for literature learning. In recent years the concept of literature has undergone significant change. While for Peter Widdowson (1999: 121) literature – i.e. ‘L’ and ‘l’ practices – refers to texts whose “originating modality and final point of reference” is in written form, new concepts would include the crossing of written, spoken and visual text practices, thus emphasizing the multimodality of literary meaning making. In the first three contributions this shift towards multimodality is addressed and discussed with reference to ELT contexts. In *Teaching Multimodal Novels*, Wolfgang Hallet suggests a semiotic approach to such texts to engage with their verbal and non-verbal forms of symbolization and story-telling. The modal transformation of the novel is illustrated with the help of Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) and Walter Dean Myer’s *Monster* (1999). The texts chosen can help learners develop their multi-literacy competencies. Moreover, they invite multi-perspectival engagement with topical issues such as intercultural identity development, coming to terms with 9/11, and the fluid boundaries between reality and fiction. The complex relationship between truth and fiction is also addressed in the following contribution. In *Narrating the ‘Truth’: Using Autographics in the EFL Classroom*, Christian Ludwig discusses how comics and graphic novels can provide a wealth of possibilities for multi-literacy education. The author challenges traditional notions of literature in two ways. First, the canon is opened to include comics and graphic novels, and, secondly, an autographic text, i.e. an autobiography presented in graphic form, is presented which straddles the common distinction between fact and fiction. The text in question, Mary Talbot’s ‘Dotter in her Father’s Eyes’, is rich in potential for developing intercultural, historical and gender-related competencies plus multi-modal literacies. In the third contribution, multimodality is discussed at the level of learning tasks. In *Performative Approaches and Innovative Methods*, Nancy Grimm and Julia Hammer show how digital tools can be used to work creatively with literature in ELT contexts. In their essay a number of educational apps are introduced and discussed with reference to their interactive potential in literature and language learning.

In the final two contributions, conventional boundaries of ELT and literature are crossed. In her essay on plurilingual literature Gabriele Blell goes beyond the traditional EFL classroom by linking English to other languages with

the help of plurilingual literary texts and films. Blell highlights the rich potential of such texts for language, multi-modal, literary and cultural learning. For Blell multilingualism is a rich resource which needs to be duly acknowledged in language learning. Moreover, she emphasizes the cultural significance of plurilingual literature in a globalized modernity because of the transcultural and multilingual life experiences of their authors. Finally, René Schallegger discusses the pedagogical potential of video games in educational contexts. Schallegger draws attention to a new generation of learners that has grown up with digital media. For these digital natives computer games have become an integral part of their everyday lives. Indeed, these are often learners' preferred ways to engage with secondary and fictional worlds. Although computer games have not found their way into the concept of *Literature* yet, they may well show where the future of the field may be headed. Schallegger convincingly shows that educationalists need not be afraid of such a future since such games, apart from their motivational impact, can also foster critical thinking abilities. In literature teaching, a little less than 20 years ago Lothar Bredella (1996: 9) saw the power of literary learning in its combination of affective and critical involvement. Judicious choice of computer games may well open up new avenues for continuing with this tradition.

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