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Teaching English Through Literature Using the Basic Skills at Upper-Secondary Level: A Methodological Approach

Summary: In addition to its archaic purpose of entertainment through songs and poems about courtly love and knighthood performed by errant minstrels, literature has perpetuated its multifaceted role in the field of education. One cannot speak about the literary genius of a community without linking it to language, culture, and society, which coexist interdependently.

The rationale for writing this paper mirrors the effort of any language teacher who wishes for his or her students to be proficient in the foreign language while using efficient didactic support and consolidating, at the same time, the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Any clever and dedicated trainer should appeal to complementary sources that satisfy the needs of both teachers and students and bring forth tools to invigorate the class atmosphere or simply replace the dull course book text with a “vivid” one.

The scholastic support offered by literary works is based on the generally admitted theory stating that students develop language and literacy skills together with better cognitive processes by means of literature, a fact which has been widely tested and unanimously accepted by researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: literature, teaching, linguistic skills, integrated approach

Literature between Theory and Practice

The connection between the literary work and its reader is a *sine qua non* which relies on subjective (emotions, ideas, education, experience) and objective (historical, cultural and social milieu) adductions. The literary text is re-created after being distorted in a prismatic refraction of light under multiple colourful experiences. Presumably, it may symbolise a transparent surface which can be “read” depending on M. M. Bakhtin’s *chronotopic*¹ elements (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* 84). Time and space materialise and influence one another in an interdependent relationship, affecting the reader’s perception. Instead of being a one-way message, the whole communication relies on a mutual participation in the act, thus the readership filling in the “gaps” of a literary text with own self-reflexivity.

The referential frame depends on text literariness, story-line and the readers’ background knowledge. The receiver of the message(s) conveyed by a literary text passes through an inner odyssey in order to meet personal experiences so that an emotional exchange may occur. The same catoptric process applies to all aesthetic fields which are meant to arouse a response, as “every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself” (Eco, *The Open Work* 4). The aesthetic can stir up the beholder or hearer or reader through the variety of feelings induced and is open to a wide range of meanings. Moreover, a work of art, in Eco’s opinion, is never “closed” because it “encloses an infinity of possible readings” (24). It is what brings universality to an aesthetic expression. Our present world is constantly surrounded by words charged with stylistic stratum. In literature, as in real world, they carry symbols and metaphors, and negotiate over the meaning. The search for literary identity leads to the question “What’s in a name?” – to reiterate a famous line – which highlights that a literary work should exist primarily *per se*, then for the general masses.

It is to consider that literature emerges from a hedonistic sense – the pleasure of writing and reading – which allows both author and reader to (re)create message. This function exploits language at phonological, morphological and syntactic level in a message which contains authorial intentions and auditorial reception and interpretation. The diverting side of literature depends on the reader’s former experience to “read” the referential system of symbols existing in a literary work. He or she realises mental

1. A *chronotope* is a literary term developed by the Russian author, translated as an undivided “time-space” category which should be considered as a whole.

images which build up the narrative, thus fantasising about the reality which has been perceived according to the stage of knowledge and culture. Literature – be it written or spoken – has gained an indispensable status mirroring a rainbow of human experiences. Literature has coined itself down the path of mass consumption considering (or not) the theoretical inputs dictated by a certain time period. Responses to literature (fiction or non-fiction) reverberate on several aspects, as outlined below:

- Literature improves the mastering of language.
- It fosters communicative skills.
- It enhances critical perspective and analysis on the literary material.
- It offers biographical or situational data on the author, the characters.
- It informs about different cultures, ways of thinking and of living.
- It expands the auditor's field of knowledge and facilitates introspection.

The use of literature in the classroom nowadays infers that the canonical texts have been replaced by works of authors from miscellaneous countries and cultures. Literary texts engage the learners both cognitively and emotionally, providing universal themes which are of genuine interest to present-day students. Accounting for literature as a tool for teaching the English language, this approach has been adopted successfully in either native or non-native English-speaking communities. The classroom setting should mould into the actual communicative aim by rejecting the focus on grammar or syntax remotely and by grasping the opportunities of using contextualised structures.

On the one hand, each teacher has unique experiences and there are measurable results when using literary material in EFL classes, but on the other hand, it is to mention the challenging and the difficulty a literary text demand. Besides the extraordinary benefits of literature, teachers should not use this support extensively, as it can carry syntactic and lexical difficulties, archaic words, and are often far from Standard English. As Hall (*Literature in Language Education* 130) argues when referring to literary texts, “difficulty can lie in many areas – plot, cultural references, text world, or others, but is often linguistic too, particularly for second language readers, and may include readers’ problems with ‘difficult’ vocabulary, style or register, syntax, rhetoric, genre, or discourse organisation”. Literature involves the exploitation of either fictional (based on imagination, such as novels, short stories, plays, poems) or non-fictional texts (based on reality,

such as autobiographies, diaries, essays, letters). The types of literary texts which can be studied in EFL classes may include: short story, novel, play, poem, haiku, biography, autobiography, monologue, dialogue, epigram, parable, fable, anecdote, aphorism, case study, letter, diary, stage play, essay, screenplay, script, video script. Excerpts from novels, short stories, plays and poems are usually very familiar and the most employed forms of literature available for classroom use.

Rather than being exposed to conventional material, to isolated notional-functional elements or to neutral, impersonal language, the learners will experience language in a different way and, what is more important, they can react to it. Through contextualised material, by exploiting literary texts while practising the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, students can easily acquire a proficient language.

An Integrated Approach to Teaching English through Literary Texts

Literary texts are the only teaching tools which involve at a higher degree the students' emotional and intellectual experiences, activating their personal feelings and opinions, thus enhancing English by interpreting the text through their own life experience. Their personal enrichment as teenagers will be achieved through behaviour, responsibility, self-esteem reflected in social and cultural awareness. The values and attitudes met in literary works connect with the world outside the classroom. Thus, this approach tends to be more student-centred, enabling the students to interact with the text and "personalise" it. Consequently, teaching should be done using interactively methods and approaches which adapt to the instructional process. Teachers should actively and constantly involve in their own lesson designing, rather than reproducing other teachers' work, as some strategies may seem inappropriate for own students. A good teacher should adapt these suggestions to his or her students' needs and learning purposes. Through questions, role play, group work, lecturing, summarising, pair and group work, eliciting, discussion, reporting, project work, presentation and other techniques, a literary text becomes a valuable tool in the EFL classes. During the use of authentic materials the learner faces language as it is, having unlimited options towards communicative tasks and follow-up activities. As literary texts abound in multiple layers of meaning, they are a rich source of communicative tasks and opinion discussions. In response

to such lessons, students develop cognitive processes and social links, empathising and becoming more reflective.

The integrated² approach englobes the previously stated approaches into an effective system of teaching and learning steps. Instead of using them separately, this approach combines the three models (the *language* model, *literature as culture* model, and *literature as personal enrichment*) by exploiting their strong points, in plain view of their strengths and weaknesses. The three models are interwoven during the instruction in a way which counts on the teacher's creativity to design a lesson plan. Moreover, the teacher may choose literary texts according to *content-based* and *task-based* learning. Content-based instruction offers a context for language learning, and does not focus on the language itself, but rather on the content conveyed through the language. In task-based instructions, the students indulge in communicative tasks, from beginners (introducing each other, sharing short personal information) to advanced levels of proficiency, where they can work in pairs or in groups (writing a newspaper article or acting out a scene of a play).

When using literature as a resource in EFL classes, the most appropriate method would be the one suggested by Savvidou (*An Integrated Approach to Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom*), who combines successfully other approaches to raise language proficiency at students. She also argues that the main focus of the English teachers today is on communicative competence while drilling on linguistic structures, to the detriment of grasping the nuances of the texts and their cultural sensitivity. In order to make better use of literary texts, the teacher should exploit them from three perspectives, presented below. In order to sustain her integrative approach, Savvidou offers a six-stage plan for teachers who choose literary texts in the EFL classes:

STAGE 1: Preparation for and anticipation of the text

Students use prior knowledge and make predictions about the topic and the overall meaning.

STAGE 2: Focusing

Learners experience the text by listening and/or reading, focusing on specific content.

2. Integrate, verb: 1. Combine or be combined to form a whole. 2. Bring or come into equal participation in an institution or body. In *Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus and Wordpower Guide* (2001: 676).

STAGE 3: Initial responses to the text

Students offer their preliminary spoken or written response to the text.

STAGE 4: Grasping the meaning

Students perform intensive reading in order to understand the meaning of the text.

STAGE 5: Linguistic analysis

This stage relies on a deeper work on the text from linguistic perspective.

STAGE 6: Interpretation and personal response

This final step elicits the students' personal view and interpretation of the text.

The integrated approach above may be subject to changes as the teacher adapts his or her strategies depending on the situation given at that moment. From personal experience, the students from the philological profiles are more open to STAGE 4 and STAGE 6, partly because they communicate in English better due to more weekly foreign language classes, partly because they possess higher knowledge in humanistic studies. This method successfully applies when the literary texts are selected to meet the classroom reality and the needs of the students, the activities having teacher-centred intervention linked to predominant student-centred tasks. Moreover, the students become motivated when they are previously given several introductory notes on the literary work, author, basic literary devices which can anchor the students to the activity.

Enhancing the Basic Skills through Literature in EFL Classes

Firstly, people learn to listen, after they speak the language and then try to read and even write in that language. The four language skills are related either through the direction of communication and through the method of communication, which can be spoken or written.

Knowing previously what type of text genre the students are going to deal with in the EFL classes, will add much to that text comprehension. For example, if they are given an excerpt from a novel, the expectations will be different from a letter of complaint. In other words, in order to have “pre-existing knowledge of the world” (Cook 69) the learners should dispose of mental representations which are activated by a particular discourse. Stimulating their interest in the lesson topic by activating their

prior knowledge will arouse interest and commitment, bringing to class “a variety of different text types” and “ensuring students with more than one genre” (Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching* 206).

To act as a reader, listener, writer or speaker, the student is requested to accomplish a set of skilled actions, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (90-91):

<p>To listen, the learner must be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perceive the utterance (auditory phonetic skills); • identify the linguistic message (linguistic skills); • understand the message (semantic skills); • interpret the message (cognitive skills). 	<p>To speak, the learner must be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan and organise a message (cognitive skills); • formulate a linguistic utterance (linguistic skills); • articulate the utterance (phonetic skills).
<p>To read, the learner must be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perceive the written text (visual skills); • recognise the script (orthographic skills); • identify the message (linguistic skills); • understand the message (semantic skills); • interpret the message (cognitive skills). 	<p>To write, the learner must be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organise and formulate the message (cognitive and linguistic skills); • hand-write or type the text (manual skills) or otherwise transfer the text to writing.

Literature as a teaching tool for the English language acquisition is the basis for developing linguistic competences, motivating the learners through authentic material, introducing the cultural dimension, as well as integrating communicative activities in the classroom. Literature provides also a multifaceted use of language and offer an undeniable source of social and cultural input enwrapped in different layers of aesthetic expression. Each lesson should include at least two skills, thus increasing the teaching success and enabling more student-centred activities. Using the four skills

with literary texts will bring into the classroom interesting tasks and a motivating atmosphere, meaningful contexts, critical and creative thinking.

Listening is the second receptive skill where learners need to *absorb*, *process* and *react* to the aural input where the listening activities are designed. For a listening activity to be effective, the teacher relies on different listening strategies or sub-skills, according to the type of text employed. For example, listening for general understanding will be different from the listening used in order to extract specific items of information. Through listening practice the learners acquire the language through its rhythm, rhyme, and intonation by means of grammar and vocabulary which they need to build speaking skills. Consequently, developing speaking abilities in order to communicate in genuine English relies on many listening activities involving different materials.

There are two “sources” for practising listening comprehension: the teacher himself/herself and the students on the one hand, and the use of electronic devices on the other hand. The latter is highly appreciated by learners as it invigorates the atmosphere and brings the native speaker’s voice providing *authentic listening* to the classroom. Good listening activities should not be based on this aspect only. When working with literary texts the students are given clear, unequivocal instructions while listening so as not to lose track and interest. The teacher can easily apply to their emotional level when exploiting literary texts and are sustained by *task-based activities* on paper sheets to help them decode the material.

Speaking is the production skill belonging to oral expression. As language is a tool for communication, through speech we communicate directly, that is involving voice, sound, timber, register, etc. Through speaking, we not only communicate our thoughts, ideas and feelings, but we also tend to understand the world around us and even ourselves better. In the classroom, making students understand what they read and what they listen to is much easier than determining them to take part in a speaking activity. Obviously, receptive and productive skills should not be separated in EFL classes, as they are interrelated. Quite a lot of English language teachers put emphasis mostly on grammar and vocabulary and do not pay much attention to speaking, not to mention teaching *pronunciation* using the *phonemic chart*. Hearing the sounds in English and the stress put on words enables the students to gather information and understanding on how to improve their spoken English.

Enhancing speaking by means of literary texts has proved to be very beneficial for EFL learners. As readers of literature, they observe the linguistic code of the whole work and the specific language used by the characters, which gives insight to the communication aspects of that particular culture being studied. Through literature the students encounter lexical items and syntactic structures from both written and spoken forms of discourse. Thus, literature becomes an inexhaustible source of language variety such as standard and nonstandard *dialects*, *sociolects*, *idiolects* and *jargons*. Although being the most difficult skill to develop, there are many classroom activities to encourage speaking: discussions, role-play, simulations, dialogue, information gap, brainstorming, storytelling, interviews, debates, questionnaires, story completion, reporting, picture narrating, picture describing, find the difference. No matter the speaking activity, students need *practice* model before the speaking task and *motivation* to get involved in the activity.

Reading based on authentic literary material, the selection of texts should be made with care, due to vocabulary, grammar and syntax structures which must be integrated in the teaching process for upper level students. Instead of being a mechanical process of decoding the text, reading is an active way of asking questions. The last reason applies especially to literary texts, where the reader must make inferences about known facts in the texts (e.g. inferring the meaning of a word from the context). In order to grasp the message of a text and understand its meaning, the learners need to understand vocabulary, grammar, syntax, order and structure of sentences which contribute to *reading comprehension*.

Writing is a very important step for a non-native English speaker who attends upper secondary courses, because he or she will write assignments which may range from one paragraph to several pages long, depending on the level of linguistic competences and profile or specialisation. Proficiency is attained through well-developed strategies which make students aware of their word choice including appropriate vocabulary, grammar and syntax in order to produce a coherent piece of writing. Students are also supposed to be aware of the content and the form of their output. Having settled the coordinates of the text (time, location, culture), the students become easily cognizant of the context in which the language was produced. Thus, they do not ignorantly plunge into the text, but they are previously familiarized with the contextual aspects which shed light on the text itself. It will be much easier to start their writing activity from a quasi-known background

which may compensate for the complex process they are ought to pertain to. This gradual process requires a thorough preparation, from simple to complex writing structures and should be applied frequently to students. They must bear in mind the fact that their written outputs are not given immediate feed-back; instead they are attentively corrected and analysed. Consequently, special care must be allotted by teachers not only to linguistic proficiency, but also to the writing process itself.

Apart from the classroom writing process, there are other types of writing the students may be asked to perform outside their classrooms in order to improve their English, either individually or in groups: shopping lists, chatting, sending each other messages, taking notes at school, bits of personal works (diary completion, poems, reading notes, reflective pieces). Thus, they are closer to the discourse intended for native speakers, which is also reflected in literary texts. Apart from day-to-day, informal language, literary texts may also provide the students with formal English, which implies register (formality, sentence structure, terminology, personal voice) and linguistic accuracy (vocabulary, grammar, spelling). The tendency in writing is towards Standard English, using language coherently and cohesively. Example of semi-controlled written activities for A1 level:

1. Complete the questioning chart on *Juliet*, then design one for *Romeo*:

0 (name) <i>What is her name?</i>	Juliet Capulet
1 (live)	Verona, Italy
2 (any brothers or sisters)	single child
3 (old)	barely 14
4 (loyal friend)	nurse
5 (in love with)	Romeo

2. Write an 8-sentence descriptive paragraph about *Juliet* using the following adjectives: *beautiful, exciting, happy, outgoing, relaxed, nervous, sad, depressed*. You may want to consider the following questions: How does the person/character look like? What does the person/character do? How does the person/character act? How does he or she make others feel?
3. Integrated teaching approach using free-patterned haiku poems:

Using haiku poems in the EFL class aims at specific vocabulary or grammar considering the lacunae in this literary form. The upper secondary students can develop their language proficiency while discovering their creative side, expressing and sharing their feelings.

Text: Haiku with visual imagery

Source: personal creation

Aims: develop creating writing, vocabulary

Techniques: use of sensory language, nature observance

Level: all levels

Teacher should previously present enough haiku poems to familiarise students with this type.



Photo: Suceava (Romania) town centre (personal archive)

STAGE 1: Introducing the lesson topic

Activity 1: The students are asked to study the photo and the two haiku poems; they elicit their knowledge about this poetic structure. The teacher does not interfere at this stage.

Activity 2: The teacher brings haiku poems (different authors) with five/seven/five-syllable patterns and free structures, asking for students' reaction and linguistic observation.

STAGE 2: Focusing on specific information

Activity: Introducing JACK KEROUAC'S PICTORIAL BIOGRAPHY. In groups, the students realise the author's biography using the prompts from a large poster card. The teacher may use real objects (photos, objects

connected to his personal life, books, magazine title, bits of articles, etc.) fixed on a wall or board.

STAGE 3: Preliminary response

Activity: The students write J. Kerouac's BIOGRAPHY:

- Jean-Louis 'Jack' Kerouac
- 12th March, 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts
- Novelist, poet and philosopher
- Started the Beat Generation movement
- *On the Road*, a representative book
- Manuscript typed on a long scroll
- Played football with short career at university
- Joined US naval forces
- Style inspired by Bebop Jazz music
- Died due to alcohol abuse on 20th October, 1969, Florida

STAGE 4: Grasping the meaning

Activity 1: The teacher reads and displays some of Jack Kerouac's poems from *Book of Haikus*.

**Bach through an open
dawn window -
the birds are silent**

**A bird on
the branch out there
- I waved**

**A raindrop from
the roof
Fell in my beer**

**1. After the earthquake,
A child crying
In the silence**

**2. All that ocean of blue
soon as those clouds
Pass away**

**3. Summer night -
the kitten playing
With the Zen calendar**

Activity 2: Brainstorm words which may define the theme of the above poems.

Example: loneliness, silence, friendship, fear, peace.

Activity 3: The writer depicts different life and nature sights, loneliness and silence (sometimes spontaneously broken) being the major themes.

STAGE 5: Linguistic analysis

Activity 1: The students are asked to write one or more sentences which describes each haiku and develop the lacunar structures.

H1 One summer morning I was listening to Bach. The windows were wide open and everything was silent.

H2 I even waved cheerfully at a bird on the branch of a fir-tree.

H3 I was sitting at my garden table, when the first rain drop fell in my glass of beer.

H4 Suddenly, the table and my elbows started trembling. After the short earthquake, my neighbour's child was the only noise I could hear.

H5 The sky cleared and I could spend the afternoon working in the garden with my wife.

H6 After the Sound family went to bed, their cat was still playing with the Zen desk calendar outside the veranda.

Activity 2: The students notice they practically have the outline of a story spanning from morning to night time, having the earthquake as the climax. They rewrite the outline and try to develop it into a story.

STAGE 6: Interpretation and personal response

Activity 1: The students write 6 sequenced haikus which may form the sketch of a new story.

Example: 1. crowded schoolyard – / standing in rows / bunches of flower

CHARACTERS (NAME AND DESCRIPTION)

CHARACTER 1: Mr. Sound

CHARACTER 2: Mrs. Sound

OTHER CHARACTERS: Mike, their grand-son

SETTING

TIME: a summer day

PROBLEM: earthquake

SOLUTION: none, apparently

THEME/LESSON: taking things as they are

WRITE YOUR STORY HERE:

TITLE:

One summer morning I was listening to Bach while my wife was in the kitchen, as usual. The windows were wide open and everything was silent ...

Teaching support:

A haiku is a type of Japanese poetry about seasons and nature. Even though it has an accurate structure and a specific number of five-seven-five syllables in three lines, there are also free-verse haiku poems. A syllable is a word part pronounced as a unit which is made up of a vowel or a vowel with one or more consonants.

The Romanian haiku follows the strict number of seventeen syllables, but the poems written in English may submit to free style. Despite its minuscule structure, a haiku may depict the chromatic and sensory elements of a whole landscape or place in nature. The teacher may also introduce other two Japanese poems, senryu (resembling haiku, whose main theme is the human condition) and tanka (a five-lined poem about nature).

Activity 2: Listen to an American teen giving her opinion on Kerouac's novel. Intermediate/B1/Source: <https://www.englishlistening.com/index.php/listen-to-passages>

Write after dictation the material you hear, trying to turn the slang and the idiomatic structures into Standard English.

Passage Transcript:

One of my favorite books is *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. and, it's about_ uh, it takes place in the forties. and it's about the, the whole beatnik, um, culture, underground bohemian life style. and, it's, it's one of those books just really makes you want to get up and go and just do what Sal Paradise did and – where he just got in the car and went, and he_ uh, there's a lot of hitchhiking involved and a lot of times no direction and it was just fun. and it was just go go go drop everything, and leave. and it's something that, that it's a lot harder to do in our society now, yaknow. hitchhiking you could get like killed if you picked up a hitchhikers sometimes. but it wa – it was that, that same free spirit that can still be found if you try hard enough. and, i just – i loved it, it such an inspiring book and it makes you just want to get up and go across country and explore, uh, the United States because there's so much to do here and there's so many people to meet. and that's one thing i really liked about book is, is there were so many people that, that he and his friends came in contact with that... were so unlike them. and so, different from the communities that they grew up in. and that's something that i, i always want to do. and now after reading the book, i know that i have to, do at least one cross country trip before i die.

Conclusion

Language classes (native or foreign) are not confined by any knowledge boundaries. Language teachers may refer to topics related to sports, philosophy, science or literature and have language by their side. When students face day-to-day real situations in their language classes, they tend to respond to in fixed patterns, almost automatically. Literature is a fascinating realm which rescues both teacher and students from stereotype classes where language learning has precisely aimed at implementing the curriculum without much turning away or using certain approaches in inflexible lesson plans, regardless of the learners' needs and interests. The

texts must be integrated in the thematic field proposed in the syllabus so that students can have a sense of seriousness and compelling work. Moreover, the steps provided in the integrated approach offer a comprehensive perspective on the activity which as a whole implies three phases: preliminary contact with the text, linguistic analysis and personal reaction to the literary text. Through well-planned activities, the students develop both their linguistic and communicative skills without studying *in extenso* the text's literariness and thus departing from the curricular prerogatives.

Teaching with literary texts extends beyond learning as a process and acquiring linguistic skills. It involves an emotional status which may be channelled to objective achievement. Learners are too often viewed as vessels which must be filled up with knowledge. Using literature in English as a Foreign Language classes creates opportunities for personal development and creativity by arousing their interest and motivation. Reading a literary text has a long-term impact on students if it bears relevance to their daily.

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