

Literature in the English Language Classroom - Poetry -

Borja J. Ojeda Pinar

Marina Torralbo Jover

1. Introduction: Why use Literature?

1.1. Motivating material:

Literature exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language. A good novel or short story can take the students to foreign countries and fantastic worlds. A play or a poem can bring up certain dilemmas and powerful emotional responses. All this can be transposed to their real lives.

1.2. Access to cultural background:

Literature can provide students with access to the culture of the people whose language they are studying.

1.3. Encouraging language acquisition:

Obviously, at lower levels, students may be unable to cope on their own with an authentic novel or short story in English. Any extensive reading we encourage them to do outside the classroom would probably need to be of graded material, such as graded readers. But at higher levels, students may be so absorbed in the plot and characters of an authentic novel or short story, that they acquire a great deal of new language almost in passing.

*If recorded literary material is available (audio-books), then students can practice their listening skills.

1.4. Expanding students' language awareness:

One of the debates centred around literature teaching in the language classroom is whether literature language is somehow different from other forms of discourse in that it breaks the more usual rules of syntax, collocation and even cohesion.

Using literature with students can help them to become more sensitive to some of the overall features of English. Some examples of different uses of English in literature are:

- Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles/Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell. ('Death of a Naturalist', by Seamus Heaney).

- Who died, Daddy?/"Nothing, Lisa," Jane told the child. "It's just big people's talk. Now eat your egg up, sweetie." (*An Answer from Limbo*, by Brian Moore).
- Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend/Upon thyself they beauty's legacy? ('Sonnet 4', by William Shakespeare)
- I was out one night on the strict teetote,/Cause I couldn't afford a drain;/I was wearing a leaky I'm afloat,/And it started to France and Spain. ('The Rhyme of the Rusher Doss Chiderdoss', by A R Marshall).

1.5. **Developing students' interpretative abilities:**

Literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/learner is actively involved in 'teasing out' the unstated implications and assumptions of the text. Thus, by encouraging our students to grapple with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text, we are helping to develop their overall capacity to infer the meaning, and this can be applied in real life.

1.6. **Educating the whole person:**

Apart from all the linguistic benefits, we cannot forget the wider educational function of literature. It can help to stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness. If we ask the students to respond personally to the texts we give them, they will become increasingly confident about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English.

2. **Ways of using Literature in the language classroom:**

Next we will consider several possibilities of exploiting literary texts for the benefit of the language learner.

2.1. **A language-based approach:**

Studying the language of the literary text will help to integrate the language and literature syllabuses more closely. Students are encouraged to draw on their knowledge of familiar grammatical, lexical or discoursal categories to make aesthetic judgement of the text.

2.2. Literature as content:

In this case literature itself is the content of the course, which concentrates on areas such as the history and characteristic of literary movements; the social, political and historical backgrounds to a text; literary genres and rhetorical devices, etc. (This is the case of our literature classes in Filología Inglesa).

2.3. Literature for personal enrichment:

Literature encourages students to reflect on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions. At the same time of learning English, they become more active, both intellectually and emotionally. This method is also an excellent stimulus for groupwork.

2.4. Stylistics in the classroom

Stylistics has two main objectives: firstly, to enable student's to make meaningful interpretations of the text itself; secondly, to expand students' knowledge and awareness of the language in general.

3. Criteria for selecting the text

3.1. The student's cultural background:

When considering this factor, think about how far the students' cultural background and their social and political expectations will help or delay their understanding of the text. For example, it would be difficult to understand Jane Austen's novels without knowing about the class system and the values of society in England at that time. On the other hand, it is also true that remote texts may arise the students' interest.

3.2. The students' linguistic proficiency:

You might need to ask yourself questions like:

- Are students sufficiently familiar with the usual norms of language use to recognise when these are subverted?
- How much of the language in the text will students be able to infer?
- Will students find it useful and enjoyable to study the text, or will they feel demotivated by the difficulties of the language?

- Even if the language is difficult, will students be motivated by other factors to study the text?

3.3. **The students' literary background:**

If the students have some kind of literary competence in their mother tongue, they may already know similar conventions for reading and interpreting literature in English.

3.4. **Availability of texts.**

3.5. **Length of the text.**

3.6. **Exploitability of the text.**

3.7. **Fit with syllabus.**

4. **Why use poetry with the language learner?**

- In order to make sense of what is a new, original use of language (new vocabulary/invented words, mixed registers, metaphors, rhythm and rhyme).
- To show students that language may not be quite as rigidly governed by rules as we think.
- Poems often enhance students to make confident interpretations, as their personal opinion is vital.
- We can also encourage students to make use of certain interpretative strategies while reading, for example speculating about the symbolic meaning of certain words rather than focusing on their literal meaning.

5. **Useful techniques to apply literature in the language classroom.**

5.1. **Analyzing:** the centre of attention is the language of the text.

5.2. **Comparison and contrast:** students have to find similarities and/or differences between two topic-related texts. In this case, the meaning is more relevant.

5.3. **Expansion:** students have to add certain elements to the text, for instance, what happens after the story finishes?

5.4. **Matching:** students are given two groups of items, which they must link taking into account both syntax and meaning.

- 5.5. **Media transfer:** a text is transformed from one medium to another, for example from poetry to prose or from written to oral.
- 5.6. **Reconstruction:** students have to re-establish certain elements in a text which have been omitted, or jumbled.
- 5.7. **Reduction:** contrary to ‘expansion’, students have to remove certain elements from a text so as to make it shorter, though still meaning the same.
- 5.8. **Replacement:** some elements of a text must be replaced with others of the same kind (N>N; V>V; etc.)

6. Activities:

6.1. Opening lines

- * LEVEL – Elementary to intermediate.
- * TIME – 7 to 10 minutes.
- * PREPARATION – Select the opening lines of five works of non-fiction and five poems. Prepare these to be shown on an overhead projector, or distributed to the students.
- * IN CLASS –
 1. The class works as one large group. Ask the students to decide which lines they think are the openings of poems. Do not at this stage tell them how many lines are drawn from poems.
 2. After five minutes, ask the students to call out the lines which they think are not the openings of poems. Note the numbers on the board.
 3. Now reveal that five of the lines are taken from poems. Ask the students to decide which these might be.
 4. Then reveal the sources.
- * NOTES – Literature, particularly in a foreign language, is often seen as something remote and far removed from ‘ordinary’ language. One of the aims of this activity is to show that literature is not necessarily a language apart. Even poetry, if we do not know it is poetry, can be mistaken for plain prose. And plain prose may have its own poetry.
- * SOURCES –
 1. Kenneth Clark: *The Nude*
 2. Nian Cheng: *Life and Death in Shanghai*
 3. Nikolaus Pevsner: *An Outline of European Architecture*
 4. D. H. Lawrence: *Collected Poems*
 5. Ogden Nash: ‘I want a drink of water, but not from the thermos’
 6. Bertrand Russell: *The Problems of Philosophy*
 7. Michael Swan: ‘Nothing to Eat’
 8. from an article in *The Independent*
 9. D. J. Enright: ‘The Municipal Waterbawd’
 10. Philip Larkin: ‘Sunny Prestatyn’
- * SAMPLE TEXTS –
 1. The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude.

2. The past is forever with me and I remember it all.
 3. A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.
 4. Water is H₂O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one; but there is also a third thing that makes it water.
 5. Have you ever spent two and a half of your three hours allotted shopping time hunting for a place to park?
 6. Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?
 7. She had nothing to eat. They made a film about her because she had nothing to eat.
 8. A young boy being led away from a station by his mother was brandishing a large knife with a serrated blade. It was plastic, but realistic.
 9. The use of a hose for non-domestic purposes can be quite costly. And even more so if an automatic sprinkler is employed.
 10. 'Come to sunny Prestatyn', laughed the girl on the poster.
- * KEY – The opening lines of poems are number 4, 5, 7, 9, 10.

6.2. **Alive Poetry**

- * LEVEL – Lower intermediate to advanced.
- * TIME – 20 minutes.
- * PREPARATION –
1. Select two or three short poems which are in some way striking, because of their rhythm, use of language, imagery, and so on.
 2. Prepare sufficient copies of the passages for each group of four students to have one set.
- * IN CLASS –
1. Divide the students into groups of three or four. Give each group a complete set of the passages you have chosen.
 2. Ask the students to represent those passages in a two-minute play in front of the rest of classmates.
 3. After each representation, show the original poem to everybody.
- * NOTES –
1. Our reaction to language is partly shaped by the way in which the words are presented. A written passage could be acted out as a play if it has some of the qualities of drama: balance and rhythm, conciseness, and internal rhyme.
 2. One of the aims of this activity is to work with the media transfer technique. Literature is not a secret, fenced-off area to which the ordinary language student has no right of access.
- * SOURCES –
1. "Resolutions", by Linda Knaus
 2. "My Dog Has Got No Manners", by Bruce Lansky
 3. "The Burp", by Anonymous
- * SAMPLE TEXTS –

1. **“Resolutions”**

My New Year’s resolutions are
to lounge upon the couch.
To spit out things like okra and
permit myself to slouch.
To make the famous Guinness book
for days without a bath.
To get the A’s in recess that
I’ll never get in math.
To seldom raise my hand in class
and try my very best
to fake convincing illnesses
the night before a test.

2. **“My Dog Has Got No Manners”**

My dog has got no manners.
I think he’s very rude.
He always whines at dinnertime
while we are eating food.

And when he’s feeling thirsty
and wants to take a drink,
he takes it from the toilet
instead of from the sink.

He never wears a pair of pants.
He doesn’t wear a shirt.
But worse, he will not shower
to wash away the dirt.

He’s not polite to strangers.
He bites them on the rear.
And when I’m on the telephone,
he barks so I can’t hear.

When I complained to Mommy,
she said, "I thought you knew:
the reason that his manners stink—
he learns by watching you."

3. **“The Burp”**

Pardon me for being so rude.
It was not me, it was my food.
It got so lonely down below,
it just popped up to say hello.

6.3. **Split poem**

- * LEVEL – Intermediate to advanced
- * TIME – 20 minutes
- * PREPARATION –

1. For this activity you will need a short poem which has a fairly regular form (the lines should be of roughly equal length).
 2. Split each line into two parts, and place the half lines under separate columns (A and B). The first half of each line goes under column A, the second under column B. Then arrange the half lines in each column so that they are not in matching order.
- * IN CLASS –
1. Read the poem aloud to the whole class. Ask the students to recall any fragments they can remember.
 2. Ask the students to work in groups of three. Give each group a copy of the split poem. Ask them to try to reconstruct the poem by matching the half lines from columns A and B.
 3. *Round-up session.* The class, working as a single group, builds up the poem line by line.
- * VARIATION – With advanced students, the activity can be made more challenging by leaving out the reading of the poem, and by asking the groups to work immediately from the split text. They should look for several different possible combinations of the half lines, and then gradually try to construct the poem.
- * NOTES –
1. This activity was originally devised to be presented in the way described under *Variation*. However, experience at seminars has shown that teachers generally find this approach too difficult. The modified approach, which begins with listening to the poem, has proved far more popular and by no means too easy.
 2. This step-by-step approach allows the students to work their way gradually from the language towards the meaning. It is particularly suitable for poems which contain striking or unusual images, for example: ‘They live in a dislocation of hours/Inside-out like socks pulled on in darkness.’
 3. After working with the poem in this way, the students will be familiar with the text. The poem can then appear again, as an ‘old friend’, in other activities.
- * TASK SHEET – With your partners, try to reconstruct the poem by matching the half lines from column A with those of column B.

Night-Shift Workers

A	B
And ears grew numb	in a dislocation of hours
Going out to work	unlike others
They live	in the sky together
They have come	from their skin like clothes
Soft as fur	from a factory
Where sun and moon shine	to working wives
Where fluorescent strips	at breakfast time
To cooling beds	flared all night
Undressing fatigue	in darkness
Waking	to machinery
They are going home	and taste teeth
Later to wake at four	in the morning
Inside-out like socks pulled on	when the day is over

They are always at an ebb	in their mouths
---------------------------	-----------------

- * **SAMPLE TEXT** –
Night-Shift Workers, by George Charlton
They have come from a factory
Where fluorescent strips flared all night
And ears grew numb to machinery.
They are going home to working wives,
To cooling beds at breakfast time,
Undressing fatigue from their skin like clothes.
Later to wake at four and taste teeth
Soft as fur in their mouths.
They live in a dislocation of hours
Inside-out like socks pulled on in darkness
Waking when the day is over.
They are always at an ebb, unlike others
Going out to work in the morning
Where sun and moon shine in the sky together.

6.4. **Personal choice**

- * **LEVEL** – Lower intermediate to advanced
- * **TIME** – 20 minutes
- * **PREPARATION** –
 1. Select a poem which you think your students will understand without much difficulty.
 2. Then think about questions to enhance a debate about the topic of the poem.
- * **IN CLASS** –
 1. Start the topic of debate and let your students talk for 5 minutes or so.
 2. After that, propose the poem and ask the students to read it aloud (one stanza or line each) to work with pronunciation, rhythm and intonation.
- * **SOURCE** –
 1. ‘A Perfect Man is Gay’, by Mandy Faye.
- * **SAMPLE TEXTS** –
A perfect man is gay

The perfect man is gentle
 never cruel or mean
 he has a beautiful smile
 and he keeps his face so clean

The perfect man loves children
 and will raise them by your side
 he will be a good father
 and good husband to his bride

The perfect man loves cooking
 cleaning and vaccuuming too
 he'll do anything to convey
 his feelings of love to you

The perfect man is sweet
 writing poetry from your
 name
 he's a best friend to your
 mother
 and kisses away your pain

He has never made you cry
 or hurt you in any way.....
 OH SCREW THIS STUPID
 POEM.....
 THE PERFECT MAN IS
 GAY!!!!!!

6.5. My Very Best Friend

- * LEVEL – Lower intermediate to advanced
- * TIME – 15 to 20 minutes
- * PREPARATION – Select a text which you feel would help to expand the students’ passive vocabulary, and make it up into a task sheet. Remove certain of the words, and for each blank space offer three alternatives, one of which should be the word actually used in the text.
- * IN CLASS –
 1. Give each of the students a copy of your task sheet. Ask the students to work on their own, and to select the alternatives they consider most appropriate for the blank spaces.
 2. After five to eight minutes, the students form groups of four and discuss their choices. After the discussion, reveal the original wording to the class.
- * NOTES –
 1. The advantage of this technique is that you can select the texts to suit your students’ language level.
 2. It is important to remember that this is not a multiple choice exercise, and that the alternatives give are not meant to be distractors. Each of the alternatives should be possible in context. The function of the alternatives is to encourage the students to consider the differences between the three words, and to think more carefully about the author’s choice.
 3. This approach is a useful way both of refreshing familiar texts and of introducing new ones.
 4. We could apply variants to this activity, such as focusing on verb tenses, prepositions, etc.
- * SAMPLE TEXT –

Poorly Dressed

I have a ... who’s not well dressed.	a) mate	b) friend	c) grandpa
He wears no hat. He ... no vest.	a) wears	b) carries	c) has
Upon his back he wears no ...,	a) cap	b) bag	c) shirt
so you can see there’s lots of	a) dirt	b) lice	c) hair
He wears no upon his feet.	a) shoes	b) socks	c) slippers
He wears no pants upon his	a) bum	b) seat	c) legs
In fact, he doesn’t wear a,	a) thing	b) stitch	c) scarf

so he can if there's an itch.	a) scratch	b) massage	c) see
I hope that you don't find him—	a) naughty	b) bad	c) rude
my dog is happy in the	a) floor	b) nude	c) mud

I have a friend who's not well dressed.
 He wears no hat. He wears no vest.
 Upon his back he wears no shirt,
 so you can see there's lots of dirt.
 He wears no shoes upon his feet.
 He wears no pants upon his seat.
 In fact, he doesn't wear a stitch,
 so he can scratch if there's an itch.
 I hope that you don't find him rude—
 my dog is happy in the nude.

'Poorly Dressed', by Bruce Lansky

6.6. The Troubadour

- * LEVEL – Lower intermediate to advanced
- * TIME – 20 minutes
- * PREPARATION –
 3. Select a poem which you think your students will understand without much difficulty.
- * IN CLASS –
 3. Ask your students to modify the poem as they wish and to think on the best way of reciting it.
 4. Each of them recites and the most original and acclaimed wins.
- * SOURCE –
Short Romantic Love Poems by Amanda Nicole Martinez
- * SAMPLE TEXTS –
I will Love you Forever
 I love you so deeply,
 I love you so much,
 I love the sound of your voice
 And the way that we touch.
 I love your warm smile
 And your kind, thoughtful way,
 The joy that you bring,
 When trouble I'm in.