Introduction

The problem of teaching foreign languages has in recent years become guided by the dominant aim of promoting the learner’s communicative competence. First and foremost, learners should be successful communicators and not necessarily recipients of large quantities of knowledge about the language. When, however, the teacher introduces students to the literature of the foreign language, the communicative ideal vanishes.

Research results

According to Mihaela Dogaru in ‘Methodology and Ways of Teaching English’, the aims that should underlie our approach to teaching literature are intrinsically linked with the problem of creating all necessary conditions of literary texts:

• Maintaining interest and involvement by using a variety of students-centred activities. Any approach that is used exclusively in the classroom turns into a bore. All activities used in language classes can be successfully used when teaching literature: role-plays, improvisation, creative thinking, discussions and questionnaires.

• Supplementing the printed page. Learning is promoted by involving as many of the students’ faculties as possible. By itself, the printed page can be a cold and distancing medium appealing to a restricted area of the intellect. As teachers, we should try to exploit the emotional dimension of literature and avoid remaining at the very surface.

• Tapping the resources of knowledge and experience within the group. Although reading literature is usually an intensely personal and private enterprise, working with a group can enhance the process. Very often someone else in a group will be able to supply the missing link or come up with the meaning of a crucial word.

• Helping students explore their own responses to literature. Any activities we might use when teaching literature, they should be aimed at helping students to develop, express and value their own responses. Thus, they will become less dependent on received opinion and more interested in other perspectives.

• Integrating language and literature. On the one hand, students benefit from all communicative activities used in language classes. On the other hand, the very tools we use in language classes can be employed so as to arrive to an appropriate interpretation of the literary text. In other words, use language to teach literature.1

According to Penny Ur, it is helpful to think of the learning and teaching of a piece of literature as a process containing three main stages: encounter and impact, understanding and familiarization, analysis and interpretation.

Encounter and impact. The teaching objective here is to get learners to perceive the basic form and meaning of the text, and for it to make some impact on them, intellectually and emotionally. It does not matter if they do not understand every single word; but they should have an overall perception of meanings. All new words that are essential for basic understanding can be pre-taught, the priority being that the text should be understood and make a real impact on the students.

‘Warm-up’ activities raise curiosity and motivation, and provide some orientation of thinking and mood; but they can also dilute the impact of the literature itself, and possibly prejudice the learners so that their perception of it is coloured by what they have been led to expect. The teacher can just provide some information about the author or the cultural or historic background before presenting the text itself, and let the literature speak for itself.

He or she may try to get through as much of the text as possible as quickly as possible, for the sake of immediate impact and enjoyment since most literature is meant to be read as a continuous text and pause occasionally to explain, or check understanding. The teacher can read aloud literary texts to the class the first time, with the learners following in their texts, unless the text is too long for this to be practicable when he or she thinks this is the best way to convey a clear first impression of the literature since students’ reading aloud is usually less clear and texts may be more difficult to understand through silent reading for the less proficient.
The teacher can check initial understanding by using closed-ended comprehension questions: who is speaking, what are they saying, where is this happening, and so on, or more open-ended ideas such as: ask students to give a quick summary in their own words, ask them to tell anything they understood, in any order; develop brief discussions, focusing on content; invite questions to be written on the board and discussed.

Understanding and familiarization. Students should interact with the text repeatedly so that they become familiar with the words and ideas and they know the sequence of events and characters so the teacher should try to help them to understand and appreciate the text in more depth and detail.

Here are some teaching ideas for understanding and familiarization. • Reread, differently from the first time (if the first time was reading aloud, then this time silently, or vice versa). • Read through looking for bits you didn’t understand: note them for later discussion. • Look through the text, pick out bits you particularly liked, or that stick in your memory; copy them out if they are short, otherwise just note the page reference. Then share. • Look through the text for a quotation which could serve as an alternative title. • Rewrite some or all of the text from someone else’s point of view. • Rewrite some or all of the text in a different genre or style: for example, report the events of a short story for a newspaper. • Present the text, or particular aspects of it in a different visual format: as a flowchart, as a diagram, as a graph, as a list of events, as a grid… • Draw an illustration; or design a book-cover or advertisement for the text.

Analysis and interpretation. A deeper probing into the meanings of a text does not necessarily demand a knowledge of the terminology of literary criticism, though this can help; it is essentially an attempt to discover new levels of meaning. The main tool for such probing is the class discussion, initiated by an open-ended stimulus cue such as ‘Let’s compare …’, ‘What would have happened if …’, ‘Why do you think …?’ The teacher should communicate his or her own enthusiasm and make his or her ideas available to the students while allowing them room to disagree and develop different perspectives. What happens if the students construct an interpretation that is in total disagreement with the author’s intention? If the teacher is particularly attached to the piece of literature in question, he or she may find it difficult to allow students to get away with such ‘wrong’ conceptions; he or she will find it easier if he or she is less involved with the literature, or if he or she is more committed to allowing free learner interpretations on the grounds that this results in ultimate personal enrichment and more valuable learning. Mistaken interpretations are often exposed as such when examined carefully in the light of textual evidence.

Conclusion

The aims that should underlie our approach to teaching literature are intrinsically linked with the problem of creating all necessary conditions of literary texts: • Maintaining interest and involvement by using a variety of students-centred activities. • Supplementing the printed page. • Tapping the resources of knowledge and experience within the group. • Helping students explore their own responses to literature. • Integrating language and literature. On the one hand, students benefit from all communicative activities used in language classes. On the other hand, the very tools we use in language classes can be employed so as to arrive to an appropriate interpretation of the literary text. In other words, use language to teach literature.

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