

A FEW REFLECTIONS ON THE SUBJECT OF LITERATURE,
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE TEACHING/ LEARNING
PROCESS.¹

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The teaching of foreign languages has always worked apart from literature. The approach to the literary text, if (and when) made, is usually based on the use of simplified texts or stylistics. In the former case, the literary text simply stops being an authentic text to work merely as a tool for the learning of vocabulary (Brumfit and Carter: 1987). As far as stylistics is concerned, the situation is a little more complex. However valid the approach may be for linguistic purposes, if misused, it can become an enormous obstacle in the process of learning literature, especially in what refers to the students' motivation.

What further complicates the divorce between the teaching of foreign languages and literature is, among other factors, the existing traditional attitude towards the teaching of literature which is almost always seen as "monotonous", "tiring" and "boring". Those who share this conservative view insist on affirming that students dislike reading and therefore there is no point in teaching it. Besides, the already referred approaches do not seem to help at all in promoting any kind of change in this sad and mistaken picture.

Another factor that helps strengthening the problem refers to the training of our teachers — and here is where I would like to focus this

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article. In the majority of cases, the training of our teachers is conservative and will not lead them towards questioning their role in classroom, let alone questioning the students' role. Our educational system in Brazil seems to favour approaches whose centre is the teacher, someone who ends up believing that s/he is 'wise' and 'learned', that his/her knowledge is to be encyclopaedic and, hence, that s/he is someone not to be questioned, and whose 'authoritative' (and authoritarian) knowledge will not tolerate the students' interference. Carter & Long (1991), assessing teachers like these (fortunately the experience does not seem to be a privilege of Brazil), point out that "There must have been teachers who created a real aversion to literature among learners who might otherwise have enjoyed it, even if not as an academic subject" (p.23).

As I already said, I find that the experience of conservative attitude towards the teaching of literature is not a privilege only of Brazil. While I was in England for my doctoral research between 1987-91, I joined a PGCE (Post-Graduate Course in Education) Group in Bretton Hall College/Leeds University, invited by Terry Gifford, who tutored the group. My interest was to undergo some real experience as far as teacher training in UK was concerned, especially because I felt that I needed some kind of practical exercise in terms of literature teaching due to the fact that my own research was not related directly to teaching. During an academic term I was able to participate in discussions, workshops and creative writing activities with the group and thus I could make a few critical reflections about the training of teachers (language and literature alike) in England. What I could derive from my experience was that the traditional attitude towards literature teaching is as old as time. It does not matter whether you are in Brazil, or in Japan (there was a Japanese student in the group), or in Scotland, or in England, in fact, anywhere in the world, because the attitudes are practically the same and the point is that a proper teacher training should provoke teachers into questioning their and the students' roles in classroom. In that PGCE Group we were exposed to research in the field which questioned traditional values and proposed alternative ones. The alternative ones

were discussed critically and transformed into something possible of being actualised in classroom. Among the values we were led to consider and question was that we teachers are not divine beings. Therefore, we must climb down from our safe pedestal. I share Brown and Gifford's (1989) view when they say that "[the teacher] is no longer the expert exegetist dispensing authoritative interpretations to students, but an enabler, questioner, supporter, challenger" (p.7). This means that we need to find the will to change attitudes in relation to our places as teachers in the process of teaching and learning in classroom, no matter whether we are teachers of literature or of foreign languages. This change has, necessarily, to question set values and propose others as far as teachers and students are concerned. As very well put by Brown and Gifford, the teacher's role is not to be the centre but to be a helping hand, someone ready to "encourage the tentative and hesitant voice" of the student, who becomes the centre.

Is it possible to find alternative approaches to the teaching of literature and foreign languages? If so, in what way are we supposed to break with conservative myths and perceptions on both sides; for example, like Rejane Mendonça (1992) who believes that it is only possible to link foreign language teaching and literature through stylistics? Or, on literature's side, how to break with elitist and colonialist perceptions that place literature on a higher pedestal (as compared to language teaching) and only allow access to it to highly qualified people, those divine beings open to 'transformation' only through the reading of canonical literary texts? It is against those views that I am talking in order to favour an approach that opens up teachers and students' horizons towards a world that encompasses both fields of knowledge.

Literature will continue to be "an arid business", as Brumfit and Carter (1987) put it, as long as different responses towards its teaching are not taken. What I intend to do from now on is to talk a little about my view of how teachers can start considering literature as a potential help for the teaching of foreign languages.

What first comes to our mind when thinking about teaching is the creativity channel as the most adequate response to the teaching of both language and literature. Then we have to think that language is always crucial for literature but, as Brumfit and Carter (1987) point out, literature is always more than language. Hence, the teaching of literature goes beyond the teaching of language. There are elements of culture, ideology, among others, which are involved in a literary text which may not be in the centre when teaching language is concerned. Literature, however, is an extremely fertile ground for the teaching of foreign languages, as Brumfit (1987) considers. The cultural model of other societies has a lot to do with the teaching of literature; in this case, to work with language in the way it is used in a situation that imitates reality can be helpful, especially because it contributes to the students' personal development, as Carter and Long (1991) defend.

In the beginning of the paper I referred to demotivating approaches, such as the use of simplified texts as literature in the teaching of foreign languages. I would like to go back to the argument of literature as a tool to teach language because it helps complementing my own argument in favour of changes. I share with Carter and Long (1991) the view that using literature as a mere instrument to teach language minimises the role of literature in the learning process. This argument, they suggest,

misunderstands the nature of language in literature and may even result in mechanistic and demotivating language activities in place of a genuine engagement with the work of literature and will probably have detrimental effects of spoiling any pleasure the poem or story might have given. (p.2)

The use of literature in the teaching of language has to be seen not as a mere tool for the learning of language. Rather, it is a way into the text, a method and it has to be taken as a kind of personal help and enjoyment for the students. If we maintain the mistaken and prejudiced

view that they dislike reading and are not used to it, we contribute to their rejecting of literature.

Approaches that are teacher-centred keep knowledge about literature in the hands of teachers. Instead of *knowledge about*, the change could start with replacing the preposition. So we would have *knowledge of* literature and this would redirect the focus of attention in our classrooms towards the student, usually a quiet mouse, silent, embarrassed and hesitant. In transforming the approach into a student-centred one, the first result will be a change in the classroom's atmosphere: from 'boring' and 'tiring', the sessions may become pleasurable and enjoyment certainly will be the main tone. In terms of literature, the change will start when we begin to use it as a *source* for learning activities for language. This is a legitimate and precious way to teach language. This means leaving the study of literature for academic purposes, i.e., for those who want to deepen their knowledge *about* literature. If we use a language - based approach to literature, it would imply delving into reading processes which, in the end, will lead students to become more active and more participant in our sessions, besides helping them to approach literature in a different way, which will in any case help them too when working with literature for academic purposes.

It is never enough to say that traditional approaches are far too dangerous in the process of learning. The use of ready-made texts (simplified ones), detailed questions, all this tends to favour the teacher, not the student.

The contemporary view of approaches to literature (and to teaching in general) shared by most researchers in the field (Brumfit & Carter: 1987, Brown & Gifford: 1989, Rosen: 1989, Carter & Long: 1991, Gillian Lazar: 1993, among others) point to a student-centred approach, for it implies exploring and sharing ideas, feeling and attitudes about the studied texts. The role of the teacher is that of an initiator of the process. My own view is that the teaching/learning process is a two-way one, and sharing responsibilities is a good way to start motivating our

students not only into learning language through literature, but also into learning that, as individuals, they are also responsible for how they learn something — be it literature, language, or any other subject. Brown and Gifford (1989) defend the idea that

The more responsibility we offer students the more they need to know about the demands we're making of them. One way to encourage more participation from them is not only to delegate tasks so that the students take a more central role, but to share our thoughts about teaching and learning. (p.41)

Most of us, I believe, have suffered from literature teachers (or others) who thought they knew everything, and because of this, our own views of a given text meant absolutely nothing. This is the experience I myself went through as an undergraduate at UFPB; it is also the testimony from my own students at UFAL when they talk about how they hate teachers who pose unanswerable questions on purpose, for the sake of transforming students into stupid pupils. This kind of teacher lacks respect for the students and believes in his/her power as the sole reason for teaching. It is clear for me that 'kilometric' questions will not help students understand a text or become more fluent in the language they are learning. Carter & Long (1991) say that "The teacher has to decide on the process which is most appropriate to making the text more accessible and the teacher will certainly not try to impose his or her own interpretation to the text on the learners as being 'correct'" (p.27). Because of our training, we teachers are led to believe that students are *tabula rasa*, and try to impose our knowledge and power over them. This is a very serious mistake that we ought to erase from our minds. The "jug and mug" (the teacher is the jug and the student the mug) theory (Rosen: 1989) is very dangerous because it takes for granted that the teacher knows everything. In terms of literature (or any other subject) our views about a text may be correct, but we have to learn to respect the students' eagerness to voice their

views, even if that is naive and childish. Never to say this is 'wrong', as Rosen (1989) points out: "Labelling what people say as 'wrong', 'out of order' and 'undesirable' is also labelling *individuals* and *social groups* as 'wrong', 'out of order' and 'undesirable'" (p.70).

Whatever we say is part and parcel of the social and psychological scene. A statement evaluating negatively what a learner says may have the power of a big blow to demotivate him/her and close once and for all the door for learning and enjoying literature. Interpretations, seen in their context, have to be accepted, for they are valid and have to be respected.

The teacher, if in the centre of knowledge, does not ask; s/he demands. This is different from the teacher whose role is that of a tutor: s/he intervenes and supervises. Maley and Duff (1991) think that in foreign language learning the use of the mother tongue is useful. They say that the use of literature as a play has a component of exchange and interchange with the text being studied. It helps testing and exploring its limits. The mother tongue can even be used as a source for helping the students deal with certain themes. Carter & Long (1991) say that "the learner of a second literature should be encouraged to read it further, and to use the experience to make comparisons and to mark contrasts" (p. 49).

Therefore, learning language through literature means introducing a process of enjoyment and pleasure in the context of teaching. It can never be seen as an obstacle to the learning of a foreign language. On the contrary, it means access to it, especially because learning has to be seen as a productive process where learners play with it as well as take it seriously.

Note

- 1 An abstract of this paper has been published in *Anais da 46a. Reunião anual da SBPC*, held in Vitória, ES, from 17 to 22 July, 1994. See B.10, p. 493.

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