TECHNIQUES FOR SELECTING AND EVALUATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

One of the most crucial issues in literature course is the choice of text. Text choice is regarded by many teachers as a mechanical matter as long as some titles and authors are provided within the programme content. Thus, they never bother about that, only when the works are not available in the local library, but nowadays most of these works are available on the internet. Some teachers also choose texts that they find more easily comprehensible and appealing to their readers or those which may go with the linguistic abilities of their students. Others also choose texts according to their length or brevity taking into consideration load and time allotted to reading sessions. The present paper presents some elaborated techniques and measures to help teachers select and evaluate reading texts appropriately.

Introduction

Text selecting for literary reading in foreign languages context is to some extent a very crucial issue for both teachers and learners. It is believed that if a text is not carefully and appropriately selected and evaluated, it would obliterate high assimilation of its ideas and eventually destroy the taste and love of literary extensive reading. Characteristics of literary text, knowledge of the global content and objectives of the programme, as well as that of learners will help teachers immensely to select literary materials properly, the matter which would reinforce learners' comprehension and interpretation and eventually a taste for reading.

1. Text Selection

Pedagogically speaking, Lazar (2000, 48) advances three major criteria in choosing a literary text. These are, the type of course, the type of students and factors connected with the text itself. The type of course comprises the level of students, i.e., which class year. The teacher has to distinguish clearly between class programmes (Beverly & Zakaluk, 1998). Second year, third year, and fourth year programmes are not similar but complementary in content. Also, reasons for learning literature and a given theme or topic must be identified by the teacher. This is to be stated in the official syllabus, but it may be slightly modified according to other criteria and circumstances of the course and, to the teachers own qualifications, to the local department urgent needs; this can be discussed in local or national meetings and seminars.

More than this is load, or intensity of the course (Lazar, op. cit). This implies inquiring about the number of sessions and hours devoted to the course and to the session. Also, whether the course is followed by tutorials or not. If yes, the teacher most of the cases will reserve a session for the course and a session to handling literary text, Thus he may use more extensive texts.

Type of student includes the dominant age since it plays a great role in raising the rate of interest of students vis a vis the material they read. Very naive short stories for instance, may not be liked by mature learners. Also the students' interest and hobbies are questioned here by

administering regular questionnaires or open panels. Hobbies and interests can not be ignored as they increase motivation and may create a literary text permanent love. Another factor here is the cultural or ethnic background of the students, or even their nationality. This is a very urgent requirement otherwise it will hinder the tolerability of the themes and topics discussed or presented by a writer. Here the teacher ought to avoid topics that may injure or offend students' feeling, belittle their personal convictions and cultural conventions, or nurture division and political disturbance (McRae, 1991; Lazar, op. cit). Lastly the students' previous experience of literary text reading inquires teachers to know, in advance, their students' experience in literature theories and literary reading. Literature in their mother tongue is to be considered here, since it can be very helpful in reinforcing the foreign literature if exploited by the teacher.

2. Text Selection Measures

The first handicap in selecting texts is the availability of text and text books to be used in accordance with the assigned programme of literature. The teacher has to survey the local library to make sure that the material necessary required to cover the content of the programme is available if not he may ask students or colleagues or even consult other libraries to provide the material. Nowadays, however, most of the literary works or else, are available on the net. Learners can do that by themselves if they are provided with some sites. The internet will make texts available to all students, through burning CD copies and reading them or just the needed extracts on a computer. Data show and slides can be used also in collective reading sessions (Brumfit & Carter, 1989).

The other point concerning text is its length. The teacher must calculate time allotted to the text in class. He has to make sure whether time for reading is enough or not. Also, the students' available time has to be considered. This requires the teacher to check their timetable to assign properly readings at home. Reading sessions can also be held regularly in a free room with or without the presence of teacher. Another necessary point is the role of the teacher in selecting the amount of reading. This includes the part of text that will be read, full version or abridged, and the amount of information that the learner needs before propping into the text. If the teacher assigns an abridged text it will be a requirement to provide learners with extra information around the text to make it intelligible to ensure an appropriate interpretation within a whole context (Brumfit & Carter, ibid).

The third point is exploitability. This implies tasks and activities that the teacher can devise to use and exploit the text fully. The teacher should then assign literary passages and devise some activities in order to invest the latent linguistic, cultural, and artistic knowledge in the text. Activities should be varied to test the reader's linguistic as wall as literary competence. Activities to test and evaluate the learners' level at figurative language, versification and prosody, theatrical and drama techniques are to be incorporated to enhance the learners' literary awareness. Some extra audio-visuals could be used like films adapted to a story or a novel, recordings of a play or poem and readings about the life of an author (Ellis et al 1991; Nuttall, 1982; Carrel, 1987). On the whole, here, the teacher is required to use many techniques any activities any audio or video support to exploit the text and benefit from the literary and linguistic knowledge inherent in that text.

The final point is the link with syllabus. This actually requires the teacher to find links and relevance with the whole programme content and the objectives set forward to attain some outcome

(Grabe, 1991). Teachers must take into consideration the aim of dealing with a text and not with another, since this should not be left to chance. The texts must go in harmony with the whole process of including literature in the programme and the major objectives that programme desires to achieve. This part will be even responsible for determining the convenient method and devising the appropriate activities and tasks to fulfill the objectives.

3. Pedagogical Criteria for Selecting Literary Texts

A pedagogical difficulty in EFL classes may be the difference between learners' intentions and interests. Assigning literary texts that may suit the whole class and foster the learners' discussion and interaction is a very vital task on the part of the teacher. This requires the teacher to investigate the learner himself, his linguistic proficiency, his cultural and literary background.

3.1. Learner's Linguistic Proficiency

Of course learners come to university with some linguistic proficiency in English language. They may read easily long texts, they may understand the strongest ideas in them, and they also may discuss and work on them. The characteristics of literary texts however might pose some problems as Lazar (op. cit, 53) explains: "Literary text departs strikingly from the usual norms of language use, it includes a great many archaisms, rhetorical devices, and metaphors; or it makes use of the dialect or register." It is highly pedagogical for the teacher to consider literary text different in form and norm than non-literary texts. Starting from this point before coping with them the teacher may check the language and figurative language of the text then determines how much of linguistic, and rhetorical points have to be discussed before propping into text reading. He may hold a whole session to enhance the learners' linguistic background in order to prepare them to handle all the linguistic points that they will encounter when interpreting the text. For this point Lazar (ibid) raises the following questions:

1) Are the students sufficiently familiar with the usual norms of language use in a given text?; 2) How much of the language in the text will students be able to infer? 3) Will students find it useful and enjoyable to study the text?; 4) Will they feel demotivated by the difficulties of the language?; 5) Will students be motivated by other factors to study the text (e.g., tapes, films, songs, events, pictures …); 6) Is the text too specialized in its language to be relevant to the type of language the learners require?

Overall, these concerns ought to precede any literary reading since it plays a significant role in the success of the course and helps the teacher to choose the most convenient text that eventually may be enjoyed and then handled by, at least, the high majority of the learners if not all of them.

3.2. Learner's Cultural Background

Here it is the learner's social and political surroundings as well as his expectations that will help him understand or not a literary text. For a learner to understand a given literary text, he is required to access to the cultural environment of that text. For instance, Austen's novels could not be properly interpreted and enjoyed unless the learner gets sufficient knowledge about social classes and class system conflicts in the English society. It is the same for Dickens' novels, Shaw's plays as well as Browning's poems. The learner's own cultural background is very helpful, but it still insufficient because of the diversity and difference that may be felt when comparing the

learner's own culture and the culture of the target language within which a literary text is written. This means that if a learner reads an English poem, short story, a novel or a play starting and relying on his own original (native) culture he will never likely understand and interact with that text. In some cases he will restrict its interpretation to a minimum depending on the limits and restrictions of the learner's own culture.

The teacher here has to foster the learner's cultural background of the target language through introducing cultural, social, and political elements into his course and before starting the analysis and interpretation of any literary text, in order avoid the interpretation of the text in the light of the learner's own culture only. Lazar (ibid: 62) affirms that "it was pointed out that readers invariably interpret text in the light of their own world-view and cultural experience"

The teacher can also benefit from other subjects taken in parallel with his course like British and American civilization, General Culture, Arabic Literature and even Psychology, and Psycho-pedagogy. These subjects can play a significant role in enhancing the learner's cultural background that would eventually help him understand the cultural components of a literary text and the author's intellectual and political implications. Coordinating sessions and meetings with the teachers of these subjects can help achieving this and more importantly if the same teacher is in charge of two subjects like British civilization and British literature. It has been proved, from discussion with the local teachers that teaching these two subjects for the same students help them develop a very strong mutual cultural background which will serve, in a very consistent way, the two subjects and even more.

Concerning cultural background and literary text selecting, the teacher must know that not all texts present cultural problems for students. The teacher should work with text in a gradual way (Carrel, 1987). He may start with texts that are more culturally accessible like those which are written by writers of close or similar cultural stock of the learners and gradually move to writers of a foreign culture. Here the teacher may refer to the themes and topics discussed in a literary work to spot the relevance of the text.

Lazar (op. cit, 24-245) develops a list of some cultural aspects to consider when using and dealing with a literary text as summarized in the table below:

Products and objects that exist in a society, but not in another
Proverbs, idioms, metaphors, humor, riddles, and sayings
Social structures, roles, relationships (e.g. Polygamy)
Rituals traditions, customs, festivals
Beliefs, values, superstitions, taboos
Political, historic and economic background
Representativeness: what class, about what people is the text written
Genre and types of different texts in the different languages
The state and level of language

Table (1): Cultural Aspects of Literary Text

3.3. Learner's Literary Background

Here the teacher must consider the learner's literary competence which is as important as linguistic competence (Lazar, 2000). This means that when choosing a literary text one has not to

check whether the text is linguistically accessible or not, but he has also to know whether learners will be able to interact with the text and its literary devices. It is assumed that learners who have already dealt with literature even in other languages will display some literary competence when they deal with literary texts in any language, because this experience will help them develop certain literary competence. Learners who have a very high linguistic competence, on other hand, may stand unable to interact with and interpret literary texts if they are not familiar with literature, that is they have no literary competence. Lazar (ibid: 54) affirms that "Students who have little literary knowledge, but are linguistically proficient, may find themselves understanding each individual word on the page without being able to make sense of the literary meanings behind the texts."

Literary competence is then that ability which allows readers to treat literary text relying on certain literary conventions and principles. This will allow them lift the words of a poem or a fiction passage then convert them into literary meanings.

Literary competence can be reinforced through introducing into literature course activities dealing with the language of literature such as figurative and rhetoric language, literary terms, literary movements, and literary forms or genres (Martinez, 1991). For a good assimilation of these literary elements, teachers should not rely on definitions only; they have to opt for other more practical activities such as matching the definition of a metaphor with a metaphor extracted from a text or a poem. On the whole, choosing a literary text will depend on the literary readiness of the learners. If the learners are literary ready, i.e., equipped with the necessary literary knowledge, they will interact with and respond to the text aesthetically and even critically and not only linguistically.

3.4. Check List for Choosing Literary Text

When a teacher has to choose a literary text the following check list may help him to do the job properly. This list is adapted from Lazer's text selecting (op. cit)

Literary Text Choosing Checklist
I – Type of Course
-Students Level /Class
-Reasons for Learning English
-Kind of English: Specialty
-Load: Length of Course.
II- Type of Student
-Age and Intellectual/ Emotional Growth
-Interests and Hobbies
-Linguistic Proficiency
-Cultural Background
-Literary Competence
III- Features of Text
-Availability of Text
-Length of Text
-Exploitability
-Relevance with Syllabus

Table (2): **Literary Text Choosing Checklist**

The checklist should be considered by teachers of literature when opting for a literary text. It will

help them find the appropriate materials for their students, and if carefully respected, it will augment some literary response and develop in learners a love of literary texts even outside classroom practice. Also it will reduce the teacher's intervention and effort in the class, as long as, learners will find the text accessible and suitable and thus enjoyable.

4. Evaluating Literary Material

When teachers select literary materials according to the criteria of literary text choice, they have to evaluate and classify these materials according to types of students, and the relevance of these materials, depending on the general needs and objectives of the course. This task can be done by the teachers of the same subject and revised continually because it changes according to learners and their readiness. The teacher, also, should not focus on the text itself as an end, but on the major objectives of dealing with a certain text and not with another (Carrel et al, 1983).

So the teacher's concern should be related to how to find a text that will foster his students' linguistic and literary background with relevance to the syllabus. Here the teacher may prepare evaluation sheets for the materials in hand for each class. He may also collect materials with students and then classify them. This evaluation will help learners also in using materials in a given class-level, i.e., evaluation sheets will guide learners to read a text, if not this year, next year, and if not next year, the following one and so on. This depends on their levels and relevance of the work to the official syllabus (Carrel et al, ibid). Lazar (op. cit) distinguishes two kinds of evaluation sheets, the Quick evaluation and detailed evaluation.

4.1. Quick Evaluation Sheet

As its name suggests, quick evaluation implies a rapid review of a book when one has a limited time or when the material is a bit short and does not pose a certain difficulty (Lazar, 2000; Collie & Slater, 2001). The following table can display this:

Title of Book (Material)	/
Author (s)	/
Publisher /year	/
Level/Class	e.g.: 2nd Year
Aim(s) to Use the Book	
Types of Text	e.g.: Extracts, Poems…
Skills and Language	Reading a Poem
Strengths / Weaknesses	e.g. : Short Poems Ambiguous …
Suitability: Reasons	Suitable : -Language -Fit the Course Points

² Table (3): Quick Evaluation sheet (QES)

The table can be enlarged according to length and overall aims of the book used. But these points can be very helpful for the teacher to make use of a book. These sheets can be prepared by teachers of the same subject and reviewed continually to bring new points, because through

reading them many other points may come up. These sheets   can also be photocopied and stuck in the book to, but preferably not to show them to learners, because some items may discourage them to read the material (Lazar, 2000; Collie & Slater, 2001).

4.2. Detailed Evolution Sheet

These sheets are prepared when the teacher has a longer time, or when the book has been read several times. Each time the teacher discovers new items and adds them (Lazar, op cit). The points given in these sheets will not necessarily be found in all books, but may be most of them. The teacher then should not insist on finding all these details in all books, i.e. some cases may be left empty and some questions may be left unanswered. The following table can be helpful:

Title of the Book / Material / Author/ Publisher
Layout: Attractive / Interesting / Illustrations / Visuals
Aims and Organization - Aims of Material - Approaches to be Enhanced - Book organization: Themes, Periods, Genres… - Use of all or Part of Material
Materials and Activities - Kind of text used: Poems, Short Stories …. - Relevance of Texts - Availability of: Tasks/ Activities / Vocabulary/ Exercises - Availability of Historical / Literary Background - Accessibility of the Material - Adaptation of Material
Accompanying Resources - Guidance to use the Materials - Availability of Recorded Material - Possibility of Using the Book by Students Working on Their Own
Suitability for class - Will be Used with Students - Reasons

Table (4): Detailed Evaluation Sheet

This list of items can be modified, expanded or even shortened depending on the material and the evidence of these points in it. When the teacher evaluates a book he can, at the bottom of the sheet, write opinions and whether the book will be used or not, with what level, and for what reasons. Classification should also show the relevance to the overall aims of the programme. Teaching can then determine whether the material will be dealt with or postponed till the students cover a large amount of knowledge or deal with some points first (Mei-yun ,1993; Lazar, 2000; Collie & Slater, 2001). On the whole, this step is very important to find links between what is being taught as theories, history, stylistics, and the required materials to be read to enhance these points.

Conclusion

It is revealed from the findings stated throughout this paper that teachers of foreign languages particularly of literature are recommended to distinguish among programmes and their contents since programmes are not similar but complementary in content. Also, objectives for learning literature and themes or topics must be identified before involving learners in reading.

Objectives stated in the official syllabus should be read, though they may be slightly modified according to the circumstances of the course and to the teachers' own qualifications, to the local student sand department needs; this can be discussed in continual or yearly local, as well as national meetings and seminars. Moreover, load or intensity of the course should be highly considered. This implies inquiring about the number of sessions and hours devoted to the course and to the session. If the course is followed by TD session, the teacher should reserve a session for handling literary text, and may use more extensive texts. Also the students' interest and hobbies should be revealed by administering regular questionnaires or open panels because they may increase motivation and may create permanent love for reading even in life after school or university. More than this, learners' cultural and ethnic background or even their nationality should be manipulated. This will help learners to tolerate themes and topics discussed or presented by a foreign. Furthermore, the students' previous experience of literary text reading should be known, in advance because it may help in reinforcing the foreign literature if exploited suitably by the teacher. All these elements together with high knowledge of the characteristics of literary text will help literature teachers to select and classify literary materials appropriately

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