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ENGLISH LITERATURE IN EFL CLASSES: THE CASE OF A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

Literature used to be a great source of material for language teaching when it was the heyday of the grammar-translation approach. However, its inherent linguistic complexity and the practicality of the emerging CLT approach to language teaching split language practitioners: while some turn their back on literature, others find it useful as an authentic source for language use and creativity. In the EFL context, the inclusion of English literature in language classes for language development purposes has resulted in teachers' dilemma about the balance between teaching literature as a study and teaching it for language study purposes. This study examines how teachers of English literature at a university of foreign languages in Central Vietnam used literary works in their EFL-majoring classes and what benefits and challenges they encountered while teaching literature to EFL students in language classrooms. The study employs a qualitative research design, with relevant data being collected through structured interviews and teachers' critical reflections. The findings showed that teachers' approaches to literary works varied depending on literary text types and teachers' preferences, but they tended to focus on students' evaluation of literary beauty, their understanding of socio-cultural life, and their responses to the situation in the works. Activities to promote language proficiency were mainly oral discussion, integrated into analysis and discussion tasks. Considering the benefits of teaching English literature in an EFL setting, teachers found that they could raise students' intercultural awareness, develop students' critical thinking and literary competence through life-like situations in the literary works. However, the findings also gave rise to the challenges of focusing on the cultural model of teaching literature, thereby hindering the attainment of language knowledge and skills. The study implies the significance of assertive learning objectives and outcomes.

Keywords: EFL, English literature, intercultural awareness, literary competence, literary text

Introduction

Language has contributed to the creation of literature, and literature is a manifestation of language in a creative way. The mutual relationship of literature with language was described as "an ally of language" (Brumfit & Carter, 1986, p.

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1). Research in second language acquisition and language teaching has also proved the role of literature as authentic material for the development of language knowledge and skills (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). In the past, literary texts were used in language classes as a "model of language" rich in vocabulary and grammatical rules with various patterns of complex sentences. When the communicative approach to language became a preferred approach to language teaching and learning, literature in the target language was turned down and gradually neglected. However, literary knowledge is still an important part of a curriculum in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it is a valuable source of experience for students to expose themselves to for a better understanding of life in the culture of the target language (Shrawan, 2019). The plot in a literary text is arguably a simulation of real-life interaction in the target language and culture, and thus it helps students to make sense of social interaction (Collie & Slater, 1987).

In EFL programs at universities in Vietnam, English literature used to play an important part in the core learning. However, the number of components and the roles of literature have changed, especially after the introduction of the six-level framework of language proficiency in the current English language curriculum. From the practice of EFL teaching in the communicative language teaching (CLT) trend, the viewpoints on the roles of literary texts, as well as how they should be used in the curriculum, must be changed. This motivates the present study, which is conducted at a university specializing in foreign languages in Central Vietnam. This study delves into the exploration of how teachers of literature take advantage of literary works to help EFL students develop their target language and of how these teachers perceive the pros and cons of teaching literature to EFL students in the CLT-preferred contexts.

Literature Review

English literature in EFL contexts

It is necessary to make a distinction between 'literature as a study' and 'literature for study'. Literature as a study involves the study that aims at a deeper understanding of the qualities and values of literary works. It is, in other words, an academic study in its own right. Literature for study, on the other hand, is a perspective that considers literary works as a resource for language teaching. The present paper discusses literature as a resource for language teaching, and the term 'English literature' refers to the literature written in English by British and American authors. The term 'literary texts' refers to texts of various genres, including short stories, play extracts, and novel extracts.

Historically, English literature was used as a prestigious source of language in second/foreign language classes when grammar was rigorously taught. Yet, at the introduction of CLT, there was language teachers' resistance to literature for its linguistic and cultural difficulties, as discussed by McKay (1982). There were also arguments against using literature in language programs for reasons of its unconformity with grammatical rules (Topping, 1968), and for many other reasons, including styles, contents, and political views (Das, 2014). However, the CLT gives credit to the authenticity of language input, which implies that literary texts are still useful in language teaching provided that it is tactically used. Arguably, students' communicative competence requires the ability to understand and interpret discourse in all its social and cultural contexts (Savvidou, 2004), and thus literary

texts are ideal because "literature provides learners with interesting and meaningful input in the written form, and it provides a means for meaningful output through writing and discussion" (Gwin, 1990, p. 7). In addition, a recent study in Thailand has proven that students achieved certain improvements in speaking and listening skills because they "were able to sustain contact over long periods during final discussions" (Isariyawat et al., 2020, p. 1328).

Notwithstanding a reconsideration of literature in language teaching, its role "remains contentious, owing to widespread differences in interpretation of the precise nature of that role" (Maley, 2001, p. 180). On this premise, teaching English through a literary text has, again, become a magnet for language educators for many years. Research into the use of English literature in EFL classes continues to capture more attention from scholars both in Europe, where English has been a lingua franca, and in other parts of the world where English has been spoken as a foreign language.

Many studies have attempted to develop models of teaching literature in language classrooms. Typically, Carter and Long (1991) suggested the language model, the cultural model, and the personal growth model. The language model focused on the knowledge of the target language, facilitating students with an understanding of the grammatical, lexical, and discoursal characteristics to comprehend the literary text. This model, however, only helps students capture the meaning that is conveyed through language but hinders the evaluation of literary significance. The cultural model, on the other hand, encouraged students to explore the socio-cultural context through the literary text (Yimwilai, 2015), and so they would be able to value the aesthetic aspects of the literary work. Nevertheless, it has been argued that this model is a traditional approach to teaching literature and it is not supportive of language development purposes in the EFL contexts (Savvidou, 2004; Vo & Cao, 2024). The personal growth model emphasizes students' responses to the literary text. Although it connects students with literary values, its application is unlikely to be achieved in a language class of students with a humble language proficiency level. Despite pros and cons, Carter and Long's (1991) models are the baseline for numerous studies towards appropriate models for teaching English literature in certain contexts. They also help teachers anticipate their potential challenges so that teachers can decide on their way to deploy literary texts that fit their teaching situations. For example, drawing on Carter and Long's (1991) models, Savvidou (2004) proposed an integrated approach consisting of a six-step procedure of teaching English literature in EFL classes in Cyprus. The approach is argued by the author to be instrumental in exploring the text stylistically.

Benefits and challenges of teaching English literature in EFL classes

Several studies have discussed the benefits and challenges of English literature in the EFL curricula, as well as suggesting approaches and activities for effective classroom procedures. Using literature in EFL classes has brought about several benefits. First, literary texts constitute a "motivating source for expanding language knowledge in EFL" (Ivana, 2022, p. 274) because they provide students with "the broader picture of English vocabulary and the sense of language as it is spoken by the native speakers in real life situations" (Ivana, 2022, p. 275). Another benefit of literary texts is that they are useful for developing students' language and communicative skills (Guetatlia & Hamane, 2022; Ivana, 2022). In addition, using literature in language classes also helps strengthen students' thinking process

"through experiencing, exploring, hypothesizing, and synthesizing processes (Hany, 2022, p. 315), especially developing students' critical thinking skills (McRae, 1991; Subhash, Sharma, Bhasin & Rajkumar, 2022). McRae (1991) also argued that the figurative language in literary texts stimulates students' "thinking in English" (p. 5), which, in return, develops students' language awareness. Finally, the cultural benefit of using literary texts is undeniable. As literature mirrors the socio-cultural life of the country where the target language is spoken, using literary texts helps familiarize students with the values of the target culture (Adeyanju, 1978; Carter & McRae, 1997).

Beneficial as literary texts are, using them in language classes has practically posed certain challenges to language teachers. According to Lazar (1993), there are three challenges of using literature in language classes, namely, language grades, literary competence, and motivation. Research into the teaching of English literature in similar contexts, such as in Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, etc., has shown that there are challenges to both teachers and students.

One of the students' challenges is their background knowledge (Yahya, 2017; Yulnetri, 2018) because the cultural and social background of the literary texts will enable them to understand the texts properly, and attract them to the lesson, accordingly (Gatdula, Gomez, Rosales, & Sunga, 2022). In addition, students' personality can be a hindrance in an English literature class where students are expected to respond to the literary text or share their own opinions. Students' language proficiency and class size can be obstacles for teachers when they use literary texts for language teaching purposes (Yulnetri, 2018). In general, student-related challenges are with motivation and the mismatch between the language of the literary text and students' language competence.

Teachers' challenges, on the other hand, are related to a wide range of factors. As Yulnetri (2018) pointed out, these factors include the levels of difficulty of literary language, the familiarity of topics, the selection of literary texts, the classroom time constraints, and the students' language proficiency and attitudes towards literature learning. Arguably, in addition to their challenges, students' difficulties also form part of teachers' obstacles in teaching English literature in EFL classes.

Previous studies of teaching English literature in EFL settings have attained certain results, offering theoretical and methodological tools to the teaching of English Literature in EFL contexts. However, there is still a paucity of research that explores the actual classroom practice. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to bridge this gap by exploring the classroom practice through teachers' reflections to gain an insight into the issue of using literature in EFL classes from the insider's perspective.

Studies in teaching English literature in Vietnamese EFL contexts

In Vietnam, English literature has been taught as a component in programs leading to the degree of bachelor in foreign languages at colleges and universities. The situation of teaching English literature in the EFL programs also has issues, as discussed in the literature. Several studies have been conducted to investigate these issues, but most of them are related to stakeholders' perceptions of literature's roles and contributions to the training programs (Ho et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen, 2023). Among the rare research into the practice of teaching literature in

Vietnamese EFL classes, Tran (2022) identified problems faced by EFL teachers in their literature classes, which are mostly in line with those discussed in the literature and previous studies. Although the author claimed to have provided insights into the issues of teaching literature in EFL classes, the study has had certain drawbacks. It was surveyed with a questionnaire consisting of Yes-No questions and Why questions for extra explanation, so the information was guided, and the respondents had limited options to select. This is a methodological gap that the present study attempts to compensate for.

Method

Research context and participants

This study was conducted at the University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University (HUFLIS), where English literature has been taught in compulsory courses (British and American Literature) to students majoring in English Language Studies (ELS) and in International Studies (IS). These students have finished courses in language skills during the first four semesters, and their language proficiency is announced at the level 4 of the Vietnam national framework for foreign language proficiency (equivalent to CEFR B2).

The material for these courses is prescribed, selected by a group of experienced teachers, and used for many years with minor updates and adjustments. English literature courses are responsible for by a group of five teachers at the Faculty of International Studies. Their teaching experience varied, ranging from five to twenty years. While this research was carried out, there were two teachers in charge of teaching classes of British Literature, and three teachers in charge of teaching classes of American Literature.

All these five teachers were invited to participate in the research. Two of them were also asked to write critical reflections for five weeks. One taught British literature, and the other taught American literature.

To avoid the risk of easy identification, the participants were coded in accordance with their contribution to the data collection: Int.01–Int. 05 for interviewees, and Ref.01–Ref.02 for the two teachers who wrote critical reflections (although they were also interviewees).

Research questions and design

As stated earlier, this study tries to explore the ways teachers benefited from literary texts in their EFL classes, as well as their perceived challenges of teaching English literature for language education purposes. Therefore, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

(1) How do teachers deploy literary texts to achieve the goal of 'literature for study'?
(2) What are the benefits and challenges to teachers from the teaching of English literature in the EFL classes?

To address the research questions, this study is designed as descriptive qualitative research. This research design allows the researcher to gain insights into an issue that has been previously explored, but by using a different perspective. One of the advantages of this research design is that it can be conducted within a short timeframe. Another advantage is that descriptive qualitative research findings can

inform policy or practice, as well as allow the researcher to develop further research (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2017).

Data collection, processing, and analysis

In this study, interviews and critical reflections were used to collect data. These data collection instruments are among the preferred ways of collecting data in descriptive qualitative studies (Berkovic, 2023).

Interviews were carried out with five teachers, one after another, using the same set of questions. The interview questions were designed based on previous studies (Adeyanju, 1978; Guetatlia et al., 2022; Ivana, 2022; Subhash et al., 2022). They were to seek information about their teaching procedure, text types, and material selection. They were also about teachers' perceived benefits and challenges in teaching their classes in the EFL-promoted manner, as well as their points of view on how to improve the current situation. The interviews were recorded under the interviewees' agreement. Each session lasted from 20 to 25 minutes. Critical reflections were pieces of free writing done by the teachers after each class. Topics for reflections were about the benefits and challenges that teachers encountered in each lesson they taught. The reflections were collected for five weeks.

Data coding, processing and analysis

There are two sets of data for this study. One was collected from interviews with teachers teaching English literature at HUFLIS. The other was collected from teachers' critical reflections written within five weeks of teaching.

Data collected from interviews was imported into the software 'Voice to Text Pro-Transcribe' to transfer to text for analysis. Both Interview texts and Critical reflection texts were examined, and thematic words were highlighted. Data were then analysed under themes related to the two research questions.

Ethical considerations

To ensure the participants' well-being and comply with the research ethics, the interviews were conducted based on the participants' voluntary consent by signing consent forms. To protect participants' confidentiality and minimize potential harm, each participant was assigned a code during the process of data collection and analysis. The information given by the participants was handled responsibly by the researcher. In general, the research procedure adhered to the ethical guidelines of the institution where the study was conducted.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' deployment of literary works in EFL classes

Although the classes follow a pre-decided learning material, teachers approach the lessons in different ways. Two teachers said they followed the basic structure of classroom procedure with a few changes where necessary due to time allotment or the text type of the literary work. The other three teachers had different procedures for different lessons. One thing these teachers had in common was that they paid much attention to the types of literary texts they taught, and the decision about the approach to the lesson procedure relied on the text type. However, their approach was quite similar, which is plot-based.

> *For plot-based texts (novels, short stories, plays, narrative poetry, etc.), a particular focus is placed on making sure students have a basic grasp of the plot. For non-plot-based texts (for instance, lyric poetry), understanding the author's emotions and an appreciation of the text's beauty are prioritized.* [Int.03]

One of the teachers even decided the classroom procedure based on the writer's backgrounds and times:

> *But when it comes to Shakespeare and his sonnets, it's a different story. As the background story behind his life and his poems has generated so much interest and debate, I let my students read more carefully about his biography and then discuss questions …* [Int.02].

Notably, more experienced teachers tended to follow the conventional classroom procedure. Their procedure often began with background information of the writer/poet, then some quizzes to check students' literary text comprehension, followed by the analysis of the text, and ended with group discussion.

The selection of procedure for the classes was also reflected in teachers' critical reflections: poems were approached by a general understanding of background information about poets and their poetic dispositions, followed by the evaluation of literary devices, emotional and aesthetic effects of the poems. On the contrary, plays were explored by students' content comprehension first, and then literary analysis and evaluation.

Information from both sets of data shows that whatever the classroom procedure was, there was always a session of discussion when students could express themselves. This is evidence that teachers did not apply a single model of teaching literature, but rather, they tended to combine models suggested by Carter and Long (1991). In teaching non-plot-based texts, the cultural model is combined with the personal growth model, while in teaching plot-based texts, all three models were applied one after another: the language model with a minor proportion followed by the cultural model and the personal growth model with equal proportions.

As most of the teachers emphasized the text contents, they did have certain preferences for a particular type of literary text. More experienced teachers said they liked poems, but their rationales for the preference were different. One found it easy to teach because the emotions and themes suggested within poems are quite universal.

> *[…] I feel like students can easily relate to the work without necessarily having to dwell deep into the socio-cultural context of the work. The messages conveyed in poems are also pretty universal* [Int.01].

The other experienced teacher, however, stressed the convenience of the length of poems, the density of information, and the complexity of language compared with other text types. Less experienced teachers preferred plot-based texts. They believed that a plot-based text offered something concrete for students to think, and thus develop their ability to think critically.

Data from teachers' critical reflections also showed similar results. Teachers in both classes of British literature and American literature found teaching poems easier, especially those on the theme of love, because it "sounds more practical and genuine" to the students [Ref.01]. However, more issues provoked students to think critically while the teachers worked with plays than with other non-plot-based texts. In addition to the motivation that this text type brings about, there are potential challenges to teachers "both in terms of language and content complexity" and "culture-related aspects" [Ref.02] when they teach plays or novels. These challenges will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

Despite different preferences, the teachers' responses are suggestive of an emphasis on the literary and cultural values of literary works rather than on students' language development. Their teaching was oriented towards Carter and Long's (1991) cultural model.

It is worth noting that all these teachers used the same set of pre-determined materials for English literature courses that, as all stated, they did not involve in the process of selection and design. This implies that the materials have been in use for quite a long time with little adjustment. But they said they had a discussion and agreement on the main points before the course commencement. With regard to the changes they would like to make to their teaching materials, there are again different points of view between experienced and less experienced teachers. The less experienced seemed to be pleased with the teaching materials, as one put it:

> *I didn't contribute to the compilation of the textbook I am teaching from, but I am quite satisfied with it. The works are arranged chronologically, linked to literary movements and significant historical events …* [Int.05].

Nonetheless, they wish to have the entire freedom to select the materials for their teaching given a chance.

For experienced teachers, they maintained a neutral attitude towards the current teaching materials, but they longed for changes in a more learner-engaging way. One teacher said she would like to add more contemporary literary works to the course materials because they are likely to be more relevant to students' interests.

In general, teachers in this study tended to deploy the texts following the cultural model, combined with the personal growth model. This orientation requires students to have a good command of the language to undertake tasks in class. On the contrary, the application of the language model was opaque, while one of the purposes of teaching English literature in the EFL context is to facilitate and promote language proficiency. This is a dilemma EFL teachers often face about whether to teach 'literature as a study' or 'literature for study', and it is even harder for them to strike a balance between the two directions.

Teachers' perceived benefits and challenges of teaching literature in the EFL classes

All the teachers in this study acknowledged the benefits that teaching English literature brought to them and their students. Teachers admitted that they had spent much time teaching literature, but they gained in return. They exposed themselves to the creative language of literature, the wisdom of life, and the survival of humanity. The teachers also showed in the critical reflections that teaching English

literature helped them self-understand as well as become more open-minded with different perspectives.

For students, English literature classes prepared them for skills and competence beyond language proficiency:

> *Teaching literature is to develop and enhance students' intercultural communicative competence and aesthetics, which ultimately has a huge impact on shaping students' outlook* [Int.01].

Most interviewed teachers agreed that teaching literary works to EFL students was different from teaching them extensive reading in terms of the ultimate achievement. While teaching extensive reading using literary works aims to boost students' reading skills and literacy accordingly, teaching literature shapes students' intercultural and literary competence and broadens their outlook. This finding is consonant with the results by Adeyanju (1978) and Carter and McRae (1997). These teachers also believed that their English literature courses encouraged students to think in English, and develop the capability of high-order thinking.

> *Teaching a literary text requires more insightful analyses, deeper research into cultural and social contexts, and, of course, critical thinking skills, all of which are for both the teacher and students* [Int.03].

The findings show that teachers have been well aware of the role of teaching English literature in developing students' critical thinking skills, and thus agree with claims in previous studies (e.g., Hany, 2022; McRae, 1991; Subhash, Sharma, Bhasin & Rajkumar, 2022). It is worth noting, however, that there was no hint of the teachers' intention to raise students' language awareness through classroom activities. This is, again, indicative of teachers' strong emphasis on the cultural model of teaching literature. Vo and Cao (2024) pointed out that "this model of teaching literature requires learners to have a good command of language, something that not all foreign language learners can easily achieve" (p.120). Although students' language level is expected to be at level 4 of the Vietnam national framework for foreign language proficiency (equivalent to CEFR B2), not all students completing the language skills courses achieved this level. For this reason, most teachers claimed that students' mixed level of language proficiency was a big problem. In this regard, students' language competence was a hindrance to the understanding and evaluation of a literary work. Teachers did not seem to see literary works to be instrumental for language improvement. This is different from the findings in previous studies (e.g., Guetatlia & Hamane, 2022; Ivana, 2022).

However, it has been documented in the literature that students' language competence has also been one of the challenges teachers face while teaching in an EFL context, especially when the class size is large and the gap between students' proficiency levels mismatches with the levels of difficulty of the language in literary works. Therefore, these teachers' perceptions and what happens in their classes are, to a certain extent, common issues in EFL classes. One teacher stated:

> *As a literature teacher, the question about the whats and hows in teaching literature to EFL students remains largely unanswered for me. One of the objectives of an EFL literature course is to improve students' linguistic skills;*

> *however, for a large class with over 70 mixed-ability students, this objective is almost impossible to achieve* [Int.02].

The process of selecting and designing course material is important, and it affects teachers' choice of classroom procedure, as well as "the whats" and "the hows" (as [Int.02] mentioned). The teachers in this study, regrettably, were reported to be uninvolved in the material development. This has driven them to different approaches and procedures as discussed earlier. The organization of class quizzes and discussion activities, as reported in critical reflections, hinted that the classroom activities were based on the topic and the socio-cultural background of the literary works. Although these activities encouraged students to speak English and think critically, they did not have a language focus, and therefore could not offer students opportunities for language development.

Another challenge found across data sets was the time constraint. This is also an excuse for not having language-related activities:

> *What is more, given the time constraint, it leaves nearly no space for language-related tasks, for example, vocabulary* [Int.02].

In addition to the time limit, students' background knowledge of the target culture and society, and their attitude towards the literature course have also been discussed in previous studies as a challenge for teachers. In the critical reflections, the teachers mentioned many times that students' readiness to get involved in classroom activities was crucial to the class accomplishment, as well as the teacher's well-being.

Arguably, teachers in the present study have faced quite a number of potential challenges in teaching English literature in an EFL setting. Most of their problems are in line with those faced by EFL teachers around the world, but they also have their problems concerning their freedom of material selection, and more importantly, the appropriate teaching model that can create a balance to ensure both students' attainment of language knowledge and skills and their pleasure from evaluating literary works.

> *It is a struggling balance between being mindful that the students in front of you are EFL learners, some of whom might have difficulties understanding the texts on a linguistic level, and, on the other hand, treating them as agentic individuals capable of empathy, curiosity, and artistic appreciation* [Int.03].

The findings from critical reflections and descriptions of classroom procedure showed that the teachers did not have any activities as solutions to the language complexity in literary works for the sake of language teaching. The reason behind this is the strong emphasis on the cultural model of teaching literature, resulting in treating literature as a discipline rather than literature for language study.

Conclusion

In short, the present paper has reported a study of considerations and practices of teaching English literature in an EFL program at a university in Central Vietnam. Drawing on qualitative data collected through interviews and teachers' critical reflections, the research results identified the cultural model (Carter & Long, 1991)

as the mainstream teaching model, although there were hints of a combination with other models. The results also indicated similarities with related research in terms of benefits and challenges that teachers encountered in teaching EFL literature. This implies that issues of teaching EFL literature are universal in EFL contexts. There were, of course, different findings compared with previous studies, as a result of local specific teaching conditions, namely, a lack of teachers' empowerment of teaching material and classroom tasks. In addition, the conundrum in an EFL literature classroom revolves around what should get more attention: the attainment of language knowledge and skills or the evaluation of literary texts. This suggests that teachers of English literature should be involved in the design of teaching material, and an announcement of the learning outcomes should be consistent and observed.

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