

## What Literature to Teach?

By A. Soe Than

We can now safely claim that Literature has reinstated itself in EFL/ESL classrooms. We have witnessed an outpouring of publications of language-through-literature textbooks, and a plethora of suggested classroom activities to exploit literary texts in language classrooms. But are we, EFL teachers, especially those who have the privilege to prescribe or revise the English curriculum, fully aware of the various factors involved in 'materials selection' for teaching literature (either small l or capital L) in EFL context? In this paper, I would like to throw light on these materials selection criteria by briefly reviewing the relevant literature.

Why is 'materials selection' (knowing how to choose the right kind of reading materials, or a literary text in the case of our own teaching context) so crucial for us?

In his introduction to the collection of papers on teaching literature published about two decades ago, Neil Gilroy-Scott (in Brumfit (ed), 1983,2) points out the decline in the prestige of English literature study abroad in EFL context. Literature-based language teaching method has been unable to promote language acquisition because the emphasis has been wrongly put on literary knowledge through fact-centred modes of learning: "the maxi-coat of literature hiding the mini-skirt of language". That was because students do not know how to approach the text and teachers do not know how to present it. In that 'traditional' teaching of literature, the opportunity for students' interaction or direct experience with the original text has been somehow minimized. There has been much emphasis on academic knowledge about literary conventions and authors' lives and historical background, dependence on outside critical authority and notes to be memorized and reproduced in the exam. In short, the emphasis has been on knowledge 'about' literature rather than knowledge 'of' literature and language, and thus the original purpose of literature teaching and reading was lost.

To realign English literature teaching in EFL so that it will promote learners' both 'language competence' and 'literary competence', I would argue that both the approach to literature teaching and materials selection need to be reviewed. We want the learner to be personally involved with the text, interacting between himself and what he reads. But that interaction between the reader and text depends on choice of texts. Simply put, one cannot readily interact with a text that does not appeal to one's interest. Therefore, in order to ensure students' personal involvement and their interaction with the text, the teacher needs to choose interesting texts with relevant themes to hook them.



I have argued above that students should be given literary texts that are personally relevant to them; a teacher should not choose a text *impressionistically*. A poem dealing with a broken marriage, for instance, may not appeal to the interest of a group of thirteen-year old students, and when imposed on them, it may result in dissatisfaction and demotivation on the part of students. Carter and Long (1991) maintain that EFL learners who are forced to study unsuitable texts are likely to part company with literature at an early date. Brumfit (1989,28) reveals that literature teaching in many situations is seriously flawed in terms of materials selection, which he calls "tacit grading". He warns that "tacit grading risks being unexamined, is perhaps self-indulgent to the interests of teachers rather than students and certainly not subject to critical scrutiny". This warning alerts our attention to the need to conduct surveys to find out students' interests and preferences in the early stages of implementing the literature course.

Nevertheless, the question still remains - what is a suitable literary text for EFL learners? McRae (1991,44) points out that the selection of suitable literary texts for use in language teaching is "difficult, controversial and ultimately pretty subjective. The criteria for text selection are manifold, and probably every individual teacher would place the important points in different order of importance" depending on their purpose of teaching literature and on the level of their students. But there are some generalisable factors involved in materials selection for EFL literature classes.

Many educators agree that we should choose a literary text which students can identify with (Lazar, 1993; Collie and Slater, 1987; Widdowson, 1983; Tomlinson, 1986). A reader will be involved in a text only when he can relate what he reads to his personal experiences. When he is involved in the text, he is more likely to gain most benefit from exposure to the language of literature. But how do we know whether a certain text may be relevant to our students or not? To be able to judge a text's 'relevancy', teachers should consider students' needs, interests, cultural background, language level (Collie and Slater, 1987), and their age, intellectual maturity, emotional understanding and literary background (Lazar, 1993). But McRae (1991,55) feels that we should not be overly concerned whether a text may not be directly relevant to students so that it will not get them involved. Because of "natural curiosity about the world", he optimistically believes, students are willing to try to bridge "the relevance gap" which the teacher fears may separate the students from the text.

After considering these student-related factors, teachers need to scrutinize a text on other text-related criteria such as availability of text, length of text (to me, length is a very important motivational factor in our own teaching context: the shorter the text is, the better!), its exploitability and whether it fits in with the syllabus, etc (Lazar, 1993). Hill (1986) suggests that, especially in the



early stages of a literature course, the texts chosen should be linguistically and stylistically simple for students. If a text requires too much background information, it should not be chosen.

Brumfit (in Brumfit and Carter (eds), 1986), dealing with the basic criteria for the selection of texts for advanced level literature classes, suggests two other criteria. Firstly, we should consider “genre representation” – by this he means that selection should not be restricted to short stories only or poems only, but students should be exposed to all types of literature. Secondly, we should consider “the classic status” of a text because when students know that they are reading a work written by a great writer like Shakespeare, they may feel encouraged to overcome the linguistic problems. But many of us would not agree with this preference for ‘canonical’ texts, especially in the context of literature teaching in EFL.

Carter and Long (1991,6) warn of the potential danger of introducing canonical literary texts to EFL learners. A text should motivate a learner to read on, to read more into it or to interpret it, but “such motivation may not always be best encouraged by classic, canonical literary texts”. They believe that any text that stimulates a sufficient interest to read between the lines will be a good choice. But difficult canonical texts which seem to be remote to learners both in terms of subject matter and language should be avoided. The literature of our time is more accessible to EFL learners (Duff and Maley, 1997) and the more contemporary a text is, the more accessible it will be to students. But Carter (1989,20) cautions that some ‘modern’ literary works present the predicaments of human existence obliquely and many of them are linguistically experimental in nature, thus not suitable for foreign students.

Based on my own positive teaching experiences, I would appeal for contemporary literature written for young native speaking adults to be included in the language curriculum. The reasons are that this kind of literature frequently deals with the problem of personal growth and development. The work written for young readers tends to be relatively short, with a small cast of characters featuring a young adult as the major character. Most importantly for EFL learners, this kind of work tends to be linguistically and stylistically less complex.

I would argue that we need to choose a text whose language difficulty is not too far beyond the students’ normal reading comprehension. This view may be validated by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis. Krashen claims that language acquisition may take place when a learner is provided with conditions to “understand (via hearing and reading) input language that contains structure *‘a bit beyond’* (emphasis mine) his or her current level of competence. If an acquirer is at the stage of level *i*, the language which learners are exposed to should contain *i+1*” (Krashen, 1981,100). He explains that learners need some challenge in order to progress linguistically but, if the challenge is too big (*i+2*) or too small or non-existent (*i+0*), they will not progress. Therefore, appropriate materials should be chosen with judicious care to give EFL students the right level of ‘challenge’.



In conclusion of this review of materials selection criteria, I would like to dwell upon what seems to me the most important text selection criterion in our own teaching context: the length of a text. Let me reiterate that short literary texts are better than the lengthy ones for classroom use. Students benefit from working with a shorter text rather than a long one, as fatigue is a factor in misunderstanding. According to McRae (1991,44), “a short text must have a clear and readily identifiable setting, and/or situation, and/or characters” and to sustain students’ interest it must involve “some element of narrative or dramatic tension”.

Alan Maley, who has produced collections of short texts for language teaching such as ‘Short and Sweet’, fully recognizes the importance of short literary texts in EFL contexts. His books entitled ‘Campbell’s Crossing’ and ‘Musical Cheers’ are collections of short, short stories originally written with foreign students in mind. He believes that students should be given literary texts that are “short enough to read in one go”. When students are given very short stories with varied and thought-provoking themes, it may arouse their curiosity to read on till the end. In his introduction to ‘Musical Cheers’, Maley mentions that EFL learners are put off by the sheer length of the stories or novels they are given to read, and it is advisable to give them something they can enjoy and understand rapidly, thereby extending their vocabulary and ‘feel’ for the language. Having read something that they can enjoy and understand instantly will also contribute to their feeling of success and confidence. Finally, it should also be remembered that a short story for native speaking students, James Joyce’s ‘Eveline’ for instance, might be considered a ‘very long’ saga by our students at Assumption University.

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