Teaching Poetry in ESL Classroom: The Way to Teach Language through Literature

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Abstract

This article focuses on how literature in general and poetry in particular may be used in language classes to develop student’s knowledge of English. The article intends to show how teaching poetry will help to teach English language in ESL classroom. First, an account is given about how poetry in general can be used in ESL class to develop communicative competence and then some reasons are given that justify how The Waste Land can be used in language classes to teach second language. Though there are thousands of poetry in English literature, The Waste Land is selected as a tool to develop student’s communicative competence in English for some absolute reasons which are discussed in detail in main content of the present article.

Key words: ESL, The Waste Land, Language and Literature, Teaching and Learning, Reading and Responding.

Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the relevant role of literature as a prime agent and resource for second language teaching. Here the focus will be on the use that language teachers may make of the modernist text The Waste Land in order to help students develop their proficiency in English. Due to its variety, Literature supplies many linguistic opportunities to the language learner and allows the teacher to design interesting activities that are “based on material capable of stimulating greater...
interest and involvement” than many other nonliterary, informative texts (Carter and Long 1991: 3). This paper is framed within the communicative approach to language teaching. This implies that the development of communicative competence should be the last aim of any language activity. The relevance of literature in this approach is that it transmits messages. It is a way of communication between the author and the reader. On the other hand, literature is written in particular form and it pays special attention to form, and this helps the learner reflect about language, another principle and goal of the communicative method. It is important that the learners develop their linguistic competence by learning how to express meanings in English, but also that they develop their communicative competence. Because only that will allow them to transmit messages, to use the language to interact, to communicate with other people, which is basic and ultimate function of language. The use of literature as a teaching tool is legitimated by the facts that it provides with authentic linguistic and cultural material, and it motivates the learners to interact.

The literary text chosen as a tool to teach second language belongs to the modernist tradition and has rarely been used in the literature as a language teaching resource. The poem *The Waste Land* is very much adequate and proper for teaching due to its high pedagogic potential both for its content and its form. Apart from this, this poem is loaded with modern ideas and philosophies which bring an extremely high interest for learner, who may very well feel identified with the poet or narrator of the poem. These are some basic reasons for what *The Waste Land* is selected as tool in ESL classes to teach the foreign language.

**Poetry in Second Language Teaching**

Though there are various literary forms like Epic, Drama, Novel, Short stories etc. used in language teaching, poetry is one of frequent appearance and most beautiful form of art to teach and learn second language. Due to their short length, perfectly suitable for a single classroom lesson, their peculiar structure, their characteristic and linguistic features, poems become favourite tools for language teachers. The evocative character of poetry, its imagery, its appeal to feelings and personal

experience make it very interesting and enjoyable for the second language learner. Especially, poetry can lead to a desirable creative expression in the foreign language and they usually provoke a strong response from the reader which will motivate further reading (Collie and Slater 1987: 226).

The importance of poetry and its usefulness in language classroom lies in the fact that poetry deviates from normal language in that it has some unusual ways of ordering words, or it attributes particular, imaginative meanings to words or combines sounds in a musical, non-ordinary way (phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, graphological, and style deviation (Ramsaran 1983: 36). The language teacher should exploit the deviances of the poetic language in order to arise the language awareness of the learners towards the way in which language can be adapted or changed to fulfill different communicative purposes.

The Waste Land and Teaching in ESL Classroom

The reason why The Waste Land is selected as a tool to teach language in ESL class is because it offers great pedagogical opportunities for its magnificent language and language use, and its controversial underlying philosophy.

From the point of view of a content analysis, the poem displays a series of features that make it very interesting for the language classroom. First of all, the poem is one of the most relevant literary works of the last century. Both literary and culturally it marked a turning point because it challenged the established orthodox standards and brought about a new current: modernism that invaded all fields of cultural manifestations, not only in literature, but also in architecture or painting. This poem changed “the face of the twentieth century culture” (Selby 1999: 7). After the Great War, Europe, its fields and its people were left exhausted. The horrors of the war, the physical, emotional, political and cultural devastation and chaos that it left behind inspire The Waste Land. T.S. Eliot, the author, like many of his contemporaries, was convinced that the old cultural and social values, norms and beliefs had been blown apart by the war and the new experiences (Selby 1999: 7). They were no longer valid
and a feeling of loss and of abandonment replaced them instead. Modernism can be compared to youth, because in this time of life there are many new experiences going on. Learners may feel the poem is telling in some way their life, the way they feel, their thoughts and feelings. They may identify with the poet and feel he is somehow telling their story of uneasiness in some moment of their lives; “it is important to select themes with which the students can identify” (McKay 1986: 194). Here rests the relevance and interest of *The Waste Land*. Its reading both creates and demands a high degree of personal involvement from the learner. The poem allows for many interpretations, since it displays a series of mythical and symbolic parts which are for the reader to interpret basing on his own experience, on his “mental and emotional structures” (Traversi 1976: 14), here we have the learners involved to their utmost in the poem.

Despite its fictional character, *The Waste Land* is a good way to increase the cultural enrichment of the learners by providing them with an insight into the past (tradition) and modern culture of “the country whose language is being learnt” (Collie and Slater 1987: 4). One of the most recurrent and relevant allusions of the poem is tradition, therefore, culture and past times play an important role in *The Waste Land*. The poem *The Waste Land* is, therefore, culturally and literary relevant, in consonance with the learner’s cultural background. It is motivating, it allows for personal involvement and cultural enrichment. Learners can draw from the poem and relate it to their personal experience. They create their own poem as they *interact* with it, and this interaction implies involvement in the reading of the poem.

It is a long poem, whose organization is rather fragmentary. As a result, this allows the teacher to design activities and organize term classes at two levels. On the one hand, the individual fragments of the poem can be used for each single lesson, for example as divided by Eliot, or he may find an alternative fragmentation; on the other hand, the poem may be used for several sessions over one or two weeks. It has the advantage that it tells many different stories within the frame of a longer story, a kind of “superstory”, and this can be exploited by developing multiple exercises that deal with each sub-theme and with the general theme. Its unusual associations of

words (collocations) or the peculiar meanings attributed to some words or expressions: “April is the cruelest month”, “stirring dull roots with spring rain”, “winter kept us warm” etc. can be used by the teacher to have the learner reflect on the nature of the foreign language

Another reason why *The Waste Land* is selected for analysis is that it is a contemporary work and therefore, its language is modern and understandable. The combination of different languages (Latin, Italian, German, etc.) that appear in the poem is also very interesting and appealing for the learners. The teacher can make learners reflect about the purpose of fusing those different languages and the effect achieved by such combination. It will help the learner to develop their knowledge of the rules of social use as well as with the rules of grammar. The poem is famous for the linguistic and conceptual difficulty. The fact that there are difficult areas, that the learners can overcome, is challenging and motivating and it is a further incentive to read and work on the poem. It is essential to make clear that experts show preference for authentic, non-simplified texts, since they are much more valuable from the linguistic point of view, because they provide real language in context and natural stimuli, by the exploration and discussion of content, that lead to examination of language (Brumfit and Carter 1986: 15). Grellet (1981: 7) and claims that the difficulty is not on the text itself but on the exercises that are required of the students.

Literature can improve reading comprehension to a great extent, because reading proficiency rests on the interaction between reader and writer, interaction mediated by the text (McKay 1986: 192). The more motivating and enjoyable the text, the more intense, real and powerful the interaction will be (Brumfit and Carter 1986: 15). When reading *The Waste Land*, learners are communicating, deciphering meanings and reflecting on language and communication strategies in the foreign language, this a “crucial factor in the development of language learning abilities” (Brumfit and Carter 1986: 14). Cassany (1999) goes a bit further and claims that reading aids develop writing abilities by spurring their own imaginative writing and by providing them with examples of language use.

Conclusion

This paper has examined a possible application of the poem by T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land* to the ESL classroom. Looking at the increasingly popular use of literature in the foreign language classroom, a justification of the selection of the poem *The Waste Land* has followed. Both formally and thematically, the poem is proved very powerful and interesting. One cannot deny its strong motivational power. Above all, the poem displays real and current language, which is, from the point of view of the methodological approach (communicative approach) extremely important. *The Waste Land* is culturally, historically and literary relevant, for which its use and study called on. Furthermore, the poem is an enjoyable piece of literature, which learners will be pleased to read. If the activities and their implementation are appropriate *The Waste Land* can be a useful tool in ESL classrooms.

References


Author’s Bio-note

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