

Teacher beliefs and practices surrounding the use of literature in the EFL classroom: A case for explicit instruction

Creencias y prácticas de los maestros sobre el uso de la literatura en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera: un caso para la instrucción explícita

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this study was to uncover the current practices and beliefs regarding the inclusion of literature in the EFL classroom among a group of 11 Chilean English teachers who were studying a master's degree in teaching EFL. Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The study found that only those teachers who had received explicit instruction on how to teach literature, or had guide teachers who modeled appropriate practices, were currently using literature in their classes.

Keywords: explicit instruction, literature pedagogy, literature, teacher beliefs

RESUMEN:

El propósito de este estudio fue develar las creencias y prácticas en la inclusión de la literatura en la enseñanza del inglés como idioma extranjero. La investigación se realizó a través de la aplicación de cuestionarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas en un grupo profesores de inglés. Los resultados muestran que solamente los profesores que habían recibido instrucción explícita a través de programas de posgrado, y/o tenían prácticas que fueron modeladas por un profesor guía utilizaban literatura en sus clases.

Palabras clave: instrucción explícita, pedagogía de literatura, literatura, creencias pedagógicas

1. Introduction

The inclusion of literature in EFL instruction is controversial, and has gone in and out of favor since the 19th century (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010). Those in opposition to the use of literature in foreign language teaching argue that the linguistic and cultural complexities inherent in authentic texts provide barriers that, if not insurmountable, would at least

require an overwhelming amount of scaffolding and thereby render its use inefficient (Khatib, Saeed & Derakhshan, 2011). On the other hand, proponents of incorporating literature in the foreign language classroom reason that the linguistic and cultural exposure the learner would gain through the interaction with authentic literary material is worth its incorporation (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). Such advocates further their point by enumerating the methods and techniques that can overcome the obstacles characteristic of working with authentic texts and make their inclusion most efficacious (Savvidou, 2004). However, it is how these viewpoints, methodologies and tools are taught and modeled to teachers, thereby informing their beliefs that ultimately affect their classroom practices (Richardson, 1996).

This study set out to uncover the practices and beliefs of 11 Chilean English teachers, who were at the time studying a master's degree in teaching EFL at a Chilean university, regarding the inclusion of literature in their English classes.

1.1. Literature review

The use of literature in the EFL classroom has gone in and out of style over the decades in conjunction with the use of such language teaching methodologies as The Grammar Translation Method, Audiolingualism, Text-Based Language Teaching and The Communicative Approach (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010). In the 1980s the pendulum began to swing in favor of the use of literature in the classroom once again (Khatib et al., 2011), and has been on the rise ever since (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). However, the use of literature in EFL instruction is still controversial. Below, I will provide an overview of the main arguments for and against the use of literature in the EFL classroom.

The case for using literature in the EFL classroom

Proponents of using literature in foreign language instruction most commonly refer to the linguistic and cultural benefits found from the use of authentic texts as well as offering a basis for discussion surrounding culture, content, and moving students towards critical thinking (Bagherkazemi & Alemi 2010).

Khatib et al. (2011) summarized the main justifications for the use of literature in EFL instruction offered by scholars in the area as:

- Authenticity: literature is, by nature, authentic input.
- Motivation: literature is motivational due to its interesting subject matter and its authenticity.
- Cultural/intercultural awareness and globalization: literature promotes intercultural awareness through addressing universal concepts.
- Intensive/extensive reading practice: literature is good for intensive and extensive reading.
- Sociolinguistic/pragmatic knowledge: literature, due to its authenticity, raises awareness of "appropriateness" through contextualized knowledge.
- Grammar and vocabulary knowledge: literature provides a wide range of grammatical and lexical input in authentic contexts.
- Language skills: literature provides excellent contexts for both input and practice in the four language skills speaking, reading, writing, and listening.
- Emotional intelligence: literature is a good source for activating emotional intelligence through relating to fictional characters.
- Critical thinking: literature encourages students to reflect, criticize, analyze, interpret, and connect.

The case against using literature in the EFL classroom

Scholars who cite the counterarguments to teaching literature in the EFL context most commonly point to linguistic difficulties, the cultural complexities which can lead to barriers in comprehension, and the lack of relevance to English for Academic Purposes or English for Specific Purposes (Bagherkazemi & Alemi 2010).

Khatib et. al (2011) summarized the main arguments against using literature in the EFL classroom as follows:

- Syntax: the level of syntactical difficulty inherent in authentic texts.

- Lexis: vocabulary found in authentic literature can be obscure and outdated.
- Phonetics and phonology: in classic, antiquated texts, the phonetics and phonology is often different than what is used now.
- Semantics: the denotation, connotation, and common use of some words found in literature have changed.
- Selection of materials: selecting materials can be problematic for both teachers and students, based on student language proficiency and background knowledge.
- Literary concepts and notions: complex literary conventions present in some genres can cause difficulty in understanding.
- Literature and academic English: literature does not help students in academic setting attain their learning goals
- Cultural barriers: authentic texts inherently rely on cultural knowledge, that may not be understood in a foreign context.

Though the reasons against using literature in EFL are numerous, the current trend is that scholars find the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and that the implementation of well-chosen pedagogical practices can usually overcome the posed challenge.

Literature pedagogy in EFL

First and foremost, if literature in the EFL classroom is to be successful, the selection of text is key. McKay (1982) argued that literature, if used, must be carefully selected, i.e. it must not be too difficult linguistically or conceptually and the focus should be on the student's experience with and enjoyment of the text. Anything else would be inauthentic relationship to literature. Thus, selecting material with these elements in mind can greatly help to overcome the obstacles of linguistic difficulties and a lack of cultural knowledge.

Once the literature is selected, implementing sound pedagogical practices would be paramount. In the late 80's Maley, (as cited in Magherkazemi & Alemi, 2010), "distinguished the study of literature as a cultural artifact from the use of literature as a resource for language learning" and presented two approaches to the former; the Critical Literary Approach, and the Stylistic Approach (p. 4). However, both of these approaches would require a high level of linguistic competence. He suggested that the best way for literature to serve a foreign language class would be one in which there was no such separation in teaching literature as a linguistic resource and literature as a cultural resource, but rather was treated as a "resource for language learning" (p. 4).

Carter and Long (as cited in Savvidou, 2004) further the dialog with a discussion of the three approaches under which to teach literature; the Cultural Model, the Language Model, and the Personal Growth Model. Under the Cultural Model, literature is treated as a cultural artifact, and students are encouraged to read literature as a basis to learn about the target culture by looking at the text through the lens of the social, historical, and political context. The Language Model treats literature as a linguistic artifact, wherein students are expected to examine the piece for vocabulary and structure, among other linguistic features. Under the Personal Growth Model students are encouraged to interact and connect with the text, focusing on their opinions, thoughts and feelings that are excited by the reading.

In 2009, Van further delineates the approaches to literary analysis: New Criticism, Structuralism, Stylistics, Reader-Response, Language-Based, and Critical Literacy, each of which have their own advantages. Van ends his paper by reminding the reader that student motivation in the learning process can be directly linked to the material used in class and how the teacher implements those materials, suggesting that these considerations should be at the forefront of any teacher's mind when selecting materials or approaches.

Moving from theory to practice, there has been much literature regarding the efficacy of the implementation of different techniques and classroom practices (Paran, 2008). Lao & Krashen (2000) showed how extensive reading resulted in higher gains in vocabulary retention and reading speed than the control group which went through a standard study skills course. Yang (2001) revealed the value of moving away from teacher-centered literature courses to student centered activities such as group work, whole-class discussions, and short writing prompts. Kim (2004) lauds the benefits of literature circles in helping the student emotionally and intellectually participate more fully in the text as well as promote language development. The above examples of practitioner research on reflective classroom

practices highlight the emerging body of grounded knowledge while pointing to the current trend of the incorporation of literature in EFL teaching.

Practitioner beliefs

The beliefs held by teachers are key to understanding their classroom practices. Additionally, it is understood that this relationship is not unilateral, but that “beliefs drive actions, and experience and reflection on action may lead to change in and/or additions to beliefs” (Richardson, 1996, p.107). This interaction between beliefs and actions, and particularly how beliefs inform teaching practices are integral to understanding how and why a teacher chooses to implement the materials and activities that they do. This is especially true when the practice in question is the inclusion of materials which are not compulsory, as is the case of literature in Chilean primary and secondary schools.

2. Methodology

Given the multitude of reasons both for and against the integration of literature in foreign language teaching presented combined with the importance of how a teacher’s beliefs affect their classroom practices, I was curious to see if current teachers positioned their decisions to either teach or not teach literature within the one of the two aforementioned scholarly camps, or if there were other factors influencing the inclusion or exclusion of literature in their classes.

The study looked at the responses of 11 Primary and Secondary Chilean EFL teachers, who were, at the time of the study, studying a master’s degree in teaching EFL, at a university in Chile. All teachers held undergraduate degrees in English Education and were certified English teachers. At the beginning of their course on teaching literature in the EFL context, students were asked to respond to a questionnaire with a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions, one of which being “Do you currently teach literature?” Students who responded that they were already using literature in their classrooms, were then interviewed. After completing the literature course all students answered a final questionnaire with a mix of open- ended and closed-ended questions.

Introductory questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of background information (name, nationality, year of graduation from bachelors, degree studied, current occupation), and the following closed and open-ended questions regarding the teachers’ background in literature instruction, whose purpose was to discover how the instruction of literature had been taught or modeled to the teachers during undergraduate studies.

- Please describe how you were taught literature in your literature/reading classes at university. What kinds of assignments/activities were you given related to literature?

Additionally, two closed-answer questions aimed at pointing in the direction of the teacher’s belief:

- Right now, I personally believe that literature is important to include in my English class YES/NO
- Right now, I personally believe that literature is practical to include in my English class. YES / NO

Finally, the questionnaire asked if the teacher was currently teaching literature:

- Do you currently teach literature? (Circle: YES / NO) If yes, how do you go about it? How do you do reading with your students? What kinds of assignments/activities do you give the class related to literature? How do you evaluate them?

The interview

If students answered yes to the final question *Do you currently teach literature?* they were then asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interview was to gather more detail on how literature was taught in their classes, as well as uncover why and how they came to teach literature that way. The interview was loosely guided by the following questions:

1. In the survey, you wrote that you teach literature in your classroom. What activities do you do in class? What assignments do you do? How do you evaluate students?
2. Why have you decided to include literature?
3. Have these activities been modeled to you or taught to you in your studies?
4. How did you decide to do these different activities? Were they modeled to you by a colleague? Did you do your own research on what to do with literature?

The final questionnaire

After finishing the course on teaching literature, which included approaches and models to teaching literature as well as explicitly teaching and modeling several different activities including literature circles, digital storyboarding, reader's theater, and digital games for literature, students were asked to fill out a final questionnaire including a combination of closed and open-ended questions, relating to the students' experience and perception, including the question:

Do you plan on teaching literature in your English class, or changing the way you teach literature in your English class after this module?

3. Results

All 11 teachers answered all questions on the initial questionnaire. Regarding the closed answers, the following chart indicates the number of positive answers per question.

Table 1
Teacher's positive answers in the first questionnaire

Question	Number of teachers who answered positively
Do you currently teach literature?	4
Right now I personally believe that literature is <i>important</i> to include in my English Class.	9
Right now I personally believe that literature is <i>practical</i> to include in my English Class.	7

As shown in Table 1 above, four teachers circled yes in response to the question 'do you currently teach literature?' Nine teachers answered positively to the importance of including literature in their English class, and seven indicated they believe that literature is *practical* to include in their English class.

By taking a closer look at various overlaps in responses, we can see that two of those nine believed that literature was *important yet not practical* to include in their English class. Interestingly, three of the 11 teachers answered that they believed literature was both important and practical to include in their English class, and yet answered that they did not currently incorporate literature in their classes.

In answer to the open-ended question, *Please describe how you were taught Literature in your Literature/Reading classes at University. What kinds of assignments/activities were you given related to literature?* a common theme emerged; the instruction teachers received in literature classes followed antiquated pedagogical models. As one teacher wrote, "We were taught in a very old fashion way... we were given the book and some questions to discuss and a report to do..."

The above mentioned assigned reading, discussion questions, and final report or essay-question examination arose as the norm: It was indicated by 10 teachers as the way literature was taught to them during their undergraduate studies, including every teacher

that answered that they did not teach literature in their own classes.

Furthermore, there was a complete lack of explicit instruction as to how to teach literature in their future classes. All 11 teachers surveyed held degrees in English Education from various Chilean universities, and all indicated that literature was taught during their degree. However, none of them indicated that the pedagogy of literature was explicitly taught during their undergraduate degree.

The Interview

Four out of the eleven teachers indicated on the questionnaire that they were currently teaching literature in their classes, and were then asked to participate in an interview. Through the interviews, it became evident that the two factors that empowered these teachers to use literature in their classrooms were having received explicit instruction regarding how to teach literature in the elementary/ high school context, and/or modeling of such instruction.

Two of the interviewed teachers had already completed diploma programs on innovative teaching strategies, each including a course on using literature with children in the EFL classroom. The other two teachers had had high school teachers or guide teachers who became their mentors whom they were able to observe effectively use literature in their classrooms, and thus replicate their practices. As one teacher commented in his interview:

“When I was at high school I found I had a teacher that made us feel like we could do anything... She did a play—Bang Bang You’re Dead. It made me feel like I could give my students that play to believe in themselves and I wanted to do the same for my students.”

Having had a model that used literature in a way that connected with the students not only augmented this teacher’s pedagogical tools, but also affected his beliefs about teaching literature, enabling him to emulate these practices in his future classes.

The final questionnaire

Notably, all eleven students answered the question, “Do you plan on teaching literature in your English class, or changing the way you teach literature in your English class after this module?” positively, as exemplified by the excerpts below.

“Definitely, I’ll start teaching literature because it is a great way to learn vocabulary, cultural aspects and critical thinking by giving the students short stories that they might work in literary groups in class.”

Here the teacher refers to three of the reasons Khatib et al. (2011) mention for including literature in EFL: grammar and vocabulary knowledge, cultural/intercultural awareness, and critical thinking. However, the teacher immediately goes on to mention the strategy of using literary circles for implementing short stories into his class.

“I’m planning to implement literature in my classes in the short term. Before taking the course I thought my biggest constraint was the level of English of my students, but in class I’ve seen several options to downgrade the content and present even the classics in a more approachable way to teens and even little children.”

Interestingly, this teacher states that his previous reasoning for not wishing to use literature in the English classroom was the language level of the students, however, he now sees how these barriers can be overcome by using appropriate pedagogical strategies.

“Absolutely, I learned a large number of new strategies to cover literature in my classes, which can make the process funnier and help learners with comprehension.”

Here the teacher speaks first of the strategies, and why the strategies are meaningful for her, which notably are not related to scholarly reasons why literature should be included in a class, but rather the teacher’s more global priorities related to the overall learning process.

4. Conclusions

This study set out to discover practices and beliefs held by a group of Chilean EFL teachers regarding the inclusion of literature in their primary and secondary EFL classes. Through the questionnaires and interviews, three interesting themes emerged. First, the only teachers

who were currently using literature in their classes were those who had received either explicit instruction on how to use and adapt literature for their classes, or those who had had this modeled for them. Second, all of these teachers had completed undergraduate degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign language which included courses in English literature, and yet none of them had received this integral formation in the pedagogy of literature. Finally, as can be seen from the results, every teacher who took the literature masters course planned on using literature in their future classes. This leads us to ask a key question of pedagogical significance: If it is desirable for literature to be taught in the EFL classroom, why are teachers not being taught literature pedagogy, such as that included in the above mentioned course, in their undergraduate degree and teacher certification programs?

These results may incline one to conclude that pedagogical beliefs had little to do with these teacher's decision to include literature in their classroom, and that this decision was much more influenced by a lack of pedagogical knowledge or tools, yet I would argue that it is more complex than this. Beliefs are not set in stone, and evolve and emerge due in part to explicit and implicit instruction that takes place through formal education (Richardson 1996). If the only model of the use of literature in the classroom that teachers had received was out of date, an implicit belief they may have held was that if this was the way to teach literature, it was not practical to include in their classrooms.

An easy solution that would address both the lack of pedagogical tools and outdated beliefs, is the inclusion of pedagogical practices in literature courses that model appropriate selection or adjustment of texts, as well as current methods and engaging activities fit for Chilean primary and secondary students. This would not only prepare students practically to meet this current trend, but would help them form beliefs about literature and literature pedagogy that would positively affect their classroom practices. Understandably, in an undergraduate degree program, literature courses may be taught as a survey classes, or from a historical perspective, however, with the movement towards including literature in EFL classes, perhaps such programs should consider an adjustment in these courses to include the explicit instruction of how to teach and adjust literature content to better prepare teachers to meet this rising need.

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