Gone are the days when the presence of literature in the language learning curriculum was unquestioned. Prestigious, endowed with the capacity to develop learned readers, literary discourse, or rather those works which the literary field considered part of the canon, were supposed to have an unquestionable intrinsic value.

With the advent of methods and approaches which focused on spoken language in international communication contexts, literary texts were abandoned or at least relegated to advanced levels of language acquisition. In the early stages, while aiming at communicative competence, the expressive and poetic functions of language were often disregarded in ELT, due to the emphasis laid on what was supposedly more practical or useful. Most textbooks aiming at the teaching of English for international communication still prioritise what John McRae (1991) calls referential language: “language which communicates at only one level, usually in terms of information being sought or given, or of a social situation being handled…” (McRae, 1991:3).

Learners are taught how to communicate in international contexts through language meant to be as culturally “neutral” as possible, but once they have gone beyond that “survival” level, once they need to express their own meanings and interpret other people’s beyond the merely instrumental, representational language is needed. By representational language we mean “language which, in order that its meaning potential be decoded by a receiver, engages the imagination of that receiver… Where referential language informs, representational language involves…” (McRae, 1991)

So what is the role of literature in foreign language education? Is there a place for literary texts in the communicative, learner-centred classroom? If so, what is meant by literary texts and how should they be approached? These and other related questions have been receiving quite a lot of attention in the ELT
field in the last few years, as literature, once related to traditional text-centred approaches, started making its way back into the EFL classroom, now within the context of reader-response theory and humanistic approaches.

Why literature in ELT?

But why should foreign language teachers be concerned with literature if, as it is often claimed, it has ‘little practical application’, ‘it is too challenging for the learner’, ‘it has to do with a specific cultural context’ and ‘it can be idiosyncratic, even subversive’? In fact, these very qualities of literary discourse are now believed to contribute to language acquisition by revealing the creative and expressive potential of language and giving learners access to new socio-cultural meanings.

As Henry Widdowson put it in an interview published by the ELT Journal in 1983 (quoted in Brumfit and Carter, 1985): "In conventional discourse you can anticipate, you can take shortcuts... Now you can't do that with literature... because you've got to find the evidence, as it were, which is representative of some new reality. So with literary discourse the actual procedures for making sense are much more in evidence. You've got to employ interpretation procedures in a way which isn't required of you in the normal (SIC) reading process. If you want to develop these procedural abilities to make sense of discourse, then literature has a place..."

Such training in deciphering discourse is a crucial factor in the development of language learning abilities. Many educators now agree that the use of texts characterised by their “literariness” or, to use McRae's distinction, by the use of representational language as opposed to a purely referential one, can help EFL students succeed in this respect: “The idea that literature is not ‘relevant’ to learners is easily quashed. Natural curiosity about the world, and about any text to be read, means that a learner is always willing to make some attempt to bridge the relevance gap which the teacher may fear separates the learner
and the text... The relevance gap is bridged by identification of (if not necessarily with) different ways of seeing the world, and the range of ways of expressing such a vision." (McRae, 1991: 55)

This return to literature is marked by a reconsideration of what literature is and how it should be approached in the language classroom. As the Argentine researcher and educator Gustavo Bombini (1989) has described it, a parallel system develops side by side with school literature and its restrictions and prejudices as to what can or should be read. A long-established text-centred canon often dominates the teaching of Literature, while this “parallel system” has its own laws of production, reception and distribution, its own criteria as to what should be included or excluded. In it, the concepts of “text” and “reading” are stretched to include not only texts of non-conventional circulation (underground magazines, the production of adolescent writers) but also graffiti, comics, computer games, video... thus advocating a strong synergy between text culture and image culture (Bombini, 1989).

At present, then, many ELT specialists believe there is room in our language classes for unconventional literary materials, as well as for Literature traditionally understood as such. After all, as Brumfit and Carter (1986: 6 & 10) have stated “it is impossible to isolate any single or special property of language which is exclusive to a literary work [...] it may be more productive for us to talk about language and literariness rather than "literary language” [...] what is literary is a matter of relative degree, with some textual features of language signalling a greater literariness than others.”

Implications for teacher development

According to Roger Sell (1995), this conception has important implications concerning the role of literature in the teacher training curriculum: “We would advocate a definition of literature that is decidedly broader than the one which...
obtained during the heyday of aestheticism or literary formalism, a definition which would more readily cover books written for children and young people themselves. Children’s and teenage books, we believe, are of cardinal importance for foreign language education, and they can gradually whet an appetite for adult classics as well. From this we draw two main conclusions. First, children’s and teenage literature should also be covered in the literary studies of trainee teachers. Secondly, trainees need to understand the theoretical reasons why, and some practical methods by which, literary texts and literature-based activities can promote the ends of language education.”

This preoccupation not only fits in with existing concerns in the ELT field but with new policies within our educational context. The Ministerial documents (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1998) that establish the basic guidelines for the training of foreign language teachers in the context of the educational reform read: “En la Formación Docente la literatura será parte del objeto de estudio desde perspectivas de análisis que incluyan aspectos estéticos, filosóficos, antropológicos, psicológicos, sociológicos, retóricos, y lingüísticos, y desde una cultura global enriquecida por la diversidad de aportes. Esto le permitirá al futuro docente contar con los elementos básicos para seleccionar textos literarios escolares canónicos y no canónicos, y las estrategias didácticas adecuadas para su abordaje.”

According to the guidelines, then, “the design, selection and implementation of teaching strategies” should be “transversally integrated” with all the content areas in the curriculum. But how is this to be implemented? I believe decisions in this respect are among the crucial pending issues underlying the reform of teacher education in our country. Should literature be a “separate subject”? Should it be integrated with other areas in the curriculum, like “Language and Cultural Studies”? What is the relationship between Literature understood as specialist study and the uses of literature in the language classroom?
Ironically, this preoccupation, clearly stated by the specialists who were in charge of writing the guidelines referred to above, seems to have failed to find its way into postgraduate training: how many Licenciaturas and MA programmes available in our country include reflection on literature and cultural studies in their curricular design?

“New” literatures

Within this reflection, the so-called “New Literatures” surely play a major role. The question of new “Literatures” and “Englishes” is particularly relevant to our profession, as it is related to the controversial issue of “linguistic imperialism” and “post-” or “neo-colonialism”. Due to the spread of English as a result of globalisation, these concepts have taken on new, subtle connotations. Presentations at ELT Conferences focus more and more on questions such as whose English to teach, for what purpose, in what way the language of the Internet is changing the English we speak and write, etc.

In Rob Pope’s words (1998), “Awareness of the colonial and postcolonial dimensions of English language, literature and culture has massively increased over the past two decades. So has recognition of the fact that most English-speaking countries (including Britain, America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) are fundamentally multicultural – and in some senses always have been […] Such prodigious changes have important implications for English Studies. We are experiencing a huge shift in the ways we construct and approach our subjects of study, as well as in the ways we perceive ourselves as certain kinds of ideological subject, geographically and historically. Along with FEMINISM and GENDER STUDIES, postcolonialism and multiculturalism have arguably done more to transform our sense of what we are about than any other recent intellectual and political movements. Throughout the English-speaking world debates about the role of English in education (as well as the functions and effects of education through English)
regularly become embroiled in arguments about ‘national’ or ‘regional’ identity, ‘mono’- or ‘multi’-culturalism, majorities and minorities. In every domain of language, literature and culture there is an acute tension and sometimes a flat contradiction between globalising processes of standardisation and localising processes of differentiation."

The term “new” is always a slippery one, very much like the prefix “post-“. How new is new? And are all “new” literatures necessarily postcolonial (however broad or narrow our understanding of the latter term)? Certainly, there is more to “New Literatures” than national / linguistic / ethnic questions. There is also gender and the impact of technology to be borne in mind, among many other factors.

What all these concerns seem to share is their focus on the fact that there are power relationships at stake behind any text. Who holds the power to decide what gets published, what is taught, what is included in the canon or excluded from it? In countries where English is a second or foreign language, what is written or published in English so that it can reach a broad public? Reflecting on such issues seems to me one of the main roles of literature within the curriculum today, whether it be in the language class or where literature is approached as specialist study.

**Taking literature into the electronic era**

So where will literature stand in the future? Undoubtedly, it is already reconsidering its position in relation to the media and to computer text. Computer hypertext, defined by George Landow in 1992 as “text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality,” has challenged the concept of literature as printed, linear and bound which has prevailed since the invention of the printing press. It has given rise to **hyperfiction**, a
literary form that can only be read on a computer screen: “non-linear interactive electronic literature. Potentially, the next stage of evolution for storytelling, where text is made of light instead of ink, where you help the author shape the story, and where you never read the same novel the same way twice” (Melrod, 1994).

These innovations are as empowering as they are unsettling. Readers are aware of the fact that they are “opening the textual track” as they advance, putting together textual “chunks” or “lexias” whose combination is virtual rather than actual. As they sit in front of the computer, readers are encouraged to “fill in gaps” in the information as they read (or rather, navigate) the text. Though they cannot change the author’s work, they can discover myriads of combinations and can actually type notes on a smaller window as they read, responding to the information gaps in the text. The boundaries between reader and writer are then blurred and the authority of the authorial voice is partially transferred to the reader: the dialogue with the text becomes an intertext that merges with the reading lexias. This reader activates procedural skills to make sense not only of discourse but of the constructive web behind it.

All this has far-reaching implications for education in general, and for literary education in particular. Hyperfiction is empowering in that the learner cannot but take an active part in the reading process, thus revealing what Alan Pulverness (1996) remarks while advocating a dialogical approach to the teaching of literature: “When the reader adds his or her voice to the host of voices present in the text, s/he experiences the peculiar intimacy of reading and each reader constructs the meaning of the text afresh. Just as words do not mean without context, the literary text does not contain meaning, determined by the writer, which it is the reader’s task to extract.”

This conception has been (and many times still is) veiled by layers of mythical respect for the authority of writers and their deputies: critics and literature teachers. Even in classrooms where the existence of multiple readings is
acknowledged, there is often an underlying belief in the superiority of the teacher’s learned reading, derived from the critics’ monopoly of interpretation. Hyperfiction not only offers multiple readings, but multiple texts (or architectural realizations of text). This simply means that no reading (not even the teacher’s!) can be considered the “correct” one, as the text itself is not fixed and it literally grows with every reading.

But even though we may hail the advent of forms of technology that contribute to the achievement of a more democratic, learner-centered classroom, we must be aware of the implications this may have in our particular context, where access to technology and levels of technological literacy are widening the social divide. If, as Beavis, (1998:244) claims “‘read[ing]’ and ‘writ[ing]’ the new technologies” can help students “understand what is entailed in the operation, reception and production of their texts”, reading in general and literature in particular, with its focus on the rhetorical nature of textual links, have a central role in the education of the future. Rather than being displaced by the new technology, literature faces the challenge of reinventing itself on the basis of its time-honoured merits, for, as Tchudi (2000:36) warns us: “…in the public eye and the eye of some educators, being “computer literate” means being able to unpack the box, hook up the hardware, and do minimal word processing […] the English language arts teacher has always been concerned with the broadest of the basic skills, the common denominators of thinking: perceiving, analysis and reflection, framing ideas in words. The new media may change the technology, but they do not change the mission.”
references


The Hermetic Garage, last number but three, 69 - 85