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Literature and Language Teaching

A guide for teachers and trainers

Gillian Lazar
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Introduction

Who is this book for?

• For any language teacher who wishes to explore the hows and whys of using literature in the language classroom. This includes:
  – teachers on pre-service and in-service training courses
  – teachers involved in the setting up and running of teacher development groups with their colleagues
  – teachers working on their own who want to improve their teaching skills.
• For those involved in the training and development of language teachers. This includes:
  – trainers working in teacher training institutions
  – directors of studies in private language schools
  – heads of departments in secondary schools
  – trainers working in-service on preparatory or refresher courses at different schools or institutions.

As a teacher or trainer you may have a background in literary studies, but be uncertain of how to use this when teaching a language. On the other hand, you may have sound practical experience in teaching or training, but be unfamiliar with literature. Whatever your past experience or interests, this book should help you to find practical ways of using literary texts in the language classroom.

What are the aims of this book?

In the last decade particularly, there has been an upsurge of interest in how literature can be used with the language learner. This book aims to help you develop a thoughtful and principled approach to using literature in the language classroom by asking you to think about some of the issues and debates which have arisen on this subject. At the same time, this book aims to provide you with the tools for developing your own classroom materials and for using these materials in a way that is relevant to your learners. You will find that quite a number of literary texts are featured. You may not want to use any of the texts themselves with your own students, but the tasks and activities organised around
Introduction

them should provide you with certain generalisable procedures and techniques which you can then apply or adapt to your own setting.

Literature is used most effectively with learners from intermediate level upwards. But this book also suggests a few ways of using literature with students at lower levels too (see Sections 6.6 and 7.7 for ideas on how to do this).

Literature itself has been greatly enriched by recent developments in the field of critical theory. Structuralism, deconstructionism, reader-response theory, feminist and Marxist criticism are just some of the branches of critical theory which have been challenging the ways in which we read and understand literature. In this book my overall aim is a practical one; it is to find ways of using literature which will help learners to achieve their main purpose for being in the classroom, that is, to improve their English. For most teachers this is the compelling goal when selecting and designing materials, and there is not really sufficient time to think about critical theory as well. I do hope, though, that one or two important insights from literary criticism which have important implications for teachers and their students will have seeped into certain sections of the book.

This book is intended very much as a starting point for teachers. If you find yourself wanting to explore a particular area in greater depth, then you might look at the ‘Suggestions for Further Reading’ at the end of each chapter. The lists included are not in any sense comprehensive. I have simply included some of the books and articles that I have found useful over the years, whether teaching or training.

How do I use this book?

The book consists largely of a series of tasks and activities for teachers to work through. These tasks are meant to actively involve the reader in ‘learning by doing’. You could work through the tasks on your own, using the key at the back of the book to help you. Alternatively, you might like to work through them with a colleague or group of colleagues, discussing your ideas together. If you are responsible for the training and/or development of teachers, then you can make use of the tasks and activities in your training sessions. The Trainer’s Notes at the back of the book suggest ways of using the tasks and activities with groups of teachers.

Each chapter of the book is designed to be relatively self-contained, although certain themes or ideas recur throughout the book. You can choose to read and study whichever you think will be most relevant to your teaching needs. Similarly, within each chapter, you may find that certain sections are more useful to you than others. From the title of each section you should be able to select those you feel are appropriate.
Introduction

You will notice two symbols which occur throughout the book: denotes that there are answers for the activity in the key at the back of the book. There are quite a number of tasks and activities which do not have this symbol. This is usually because they are very open-ended and are intended to provoke discussion and reflection rather than to provide a single right answer.

The symbol next to an activity indicates that this particular task also develops English language skills. These activities might be of interest to you if you wish to use this book not only to improve your teaching skills, but also to improve your language skills and proficiency in English. By working through these activities your knowledge of English and how it is used will be extended. At the same time, you will be developing some methodological insights as to how the procedures and techniques in the task you have done can be applied to your own students.

You will notice that Chapter 8 consists largely of observation sheets designed to help you think about your lessons using literature, both before and after the lesson. You might find it useful to use some of these observation sheets as you work through the book and try out some of the ideas in your classroom. The observation tasks will help to focus your thinking on certain aspects of using literature in the language classroom.