

## Reading Literary Texts in the FL Classroom: Enjoyment or Difficulty of Translation?

قراءة النصوص الأدبية في قسم اللغات الأجنبية: متعة أم صعوبة الترجمة؟

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### Abstract

For many literary text readers, this kind of discourse is a source of enjoyment and stimulating imagination. However, readers in FL may face difficulties in understanding vocabulary and translating the words into their native language. Therefore, this can reduce their desire and the feeling of happiness they may experience when reading novels, short stories, and drama. In this regard, teachers, in the FL classroom, have to be aware of the criteria of selecting literary works according to the age and level of their students in order to create balance between text enjoyment and FL learning via these texts. So, the present article focuses on highlighting the characteristics of the literary text; recognising the difficulties of translating it; and the role of the teachers in developing the students' translation strategies to enjoy reading this type of texts.

**Keywords:** literary text, teaching literature, the FL classroom, translation, vocabulary

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### ملخص:

بالنسبة للكثير من قراء النص الأدبي، إن هذا النوع من الخطاب هو مصدر للاستمتاع وتحفيز الخيال. ولكن يمكن للقراء باللغة الأجنبية أن يواجهوا صعوبات في فهم المفردات اللغوية وترجمة الكلمات إلى لغتهم الأم.

وعليه فإن هذا يمكن أن يقلل من رغبتهم واحساسهم بالسعادة عند قراءة الروايات، القصص القصيرة والدراما. في هذا الصدد، يجب أن يكون أساتذة اللغة الأجنبية على درجة كافية من الوعي بالنسبة للمعايير اللازمة لانتقاء الأعمال الأدبية وفقا لعمر طلبتهم ومستواهم وهذا لخلق التوازن المطلوب بين متعة قراءة النص وتعلم اللغة الأجنبية من خلال هذه النصوص. إذن فهذا المقال يركز على تسليط الضوء على خصائص النص الأدبي؛ تحديد صعوبات ترجمته؛ ودور الأساتذة في تطوير تقنيات الترجمة للطلبة للتمكن من الاستمتاع بقراءة هذا النوع من النصوص.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** النص الأدبي، تدريس الأدب، قسم

اللغات الأجنبية، الترجمة، مفردات اللغة.

### 1. Introduction

For Arabic students, reading literary texts is a complex procedure because of the barrier of the FL in which the text is written. It is difficult, especially for beginners, to translate the text into their own language since the nature of literary texts is related to reading between the lines and understanding the implicit message of the authors.

Literature plays an important role in enhancing the process of learning for FL students. For teaching FL, a deep study of the target language and literature must be given more opportunities. Many researchers acknowledge that literary texts should be

considered and used as language teaching resources in addition to being objects of literary study themselves. However, teachers have to choose carefully the appropriate texts for their learners: a text which is extremely difficult, in terms of linguistics, grammar, and vocabulary, may not provide enough objectives. Also, they need to focus on selecting stylistically uncomplicated literary texts with the themes that the students have the ability to identify.

Via reading literary texts that reflect the real society aspects, readers can have a view about the different social contexts of English native speakers: these contexts of communication provide them with the details used by them in performing various roles in their own communities. They learn the different social behavior and people's ways of thinking. Readers of foreign literary works, especially beginners, face difficulties in translating words and this issue may reduce their enjoyment of living the story with the characters and their ability to understand the literary message.

In the light of this, this article deals with the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of the literary text in comparison with the other types of discourse?
- What are the difficulties of translating literary texts?
- How can the teachers raise the students' competence of translating literary texts?

To answer the previous questions, this article highlights many issues. First, it begins with the significance of literature in general. Second, deals with the main techniques and tips of translating the literary discourse. Third, the relationship between the teachers/learners and the literary text in FL is described in details in this article.

## **2. The Nature of Literary Texts:**

In order to translate literary texts and to understand the author's hidden message, the students and readers have to be familiar with the nature of these texts as comparison with the other types of discourse. The concept "literature" has been defined in different ways. For instance, Little Wood (1975) defines it as:

An instance of the productive use of a limited number of linguistic structures in order to achieve communication. The other source defined literature as "... a creative work of art, which expresses the truth of experience in terms of the beauty to comprehend, and it is means of communicating ideas of intellectual and social significance<sup>1</sup>.

It refers to any work of art like fiction (short story, novel, novella, play). Also, it includes drama (tragedy/comedy) and poetry that people read either for pleasure or for their academic objective.

For many readers, literature is a source of enjoyment because it allows them to dream and to live with the characters. For that reason, literary texts last long in the memory of the learner. Thus, it is an appropriate environment for FL teaching/learning.

FL learners need a real context for successful acquisition of language. In this case, literature provides its own real language atmosphere: Collie and Slater (1987) believe that

literature is an authentic material of ensuring background about the social aspects of a foreign community. Drama can increase the students' desire to learn language and it creates a comprehensible and contextualized environment which familiarizes the students with the new social context in which they are supposed to use the new language<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, McKay (1982) studied the issue of literature inclusion in the TFL curriculum. She believes that it is not useful for supporting the teacher to achieve his/her academic objectives<sup>3</sup>.

She wrote the following arguments against using literature. Firstly, as a major purpose as ESL teachers is teaching language grammar, and literature, due to its difficulty, plays insignificant role to this objective. Secondly, studying literature adds nothing to students' academic/occupational purpose. Lastly, literature reflects the foreign world, the social atmosphere of which the students are unfamiliar<sup>4</sup>.

However, Bovey (1972) thinks that literature develops the learners' language skills due to the fact that it promotes knowledge of vocabulary and syntax. It improves the readers' awareness of language use and usage (grammar for communication in real contexts)<sup>5</sup>.

In the light of this, literature can encourage students to read, and literary texts raise the learners' reading competence. Here, Bovey (1972) points out that literature helps to develop patience, the students 'self-discovery of new idea (critical thinking), and familiarity with one else's culture<sup>6</sup>. Mackay (1982) adds:

Literature does indeed have a place in the ESL curriculum. For many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. Our success in using literature, of course, greatly depends up on a selection of texts which will not be too difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level<sup>7</sup>.

Melakneh (1999) thinks that student, especially beginners, have to read carefully selected and valued materials by professional teachers (instructors). However, according to this source limiting books to be read in literature is not recommended because it is believed to decrease the comprehensibility of the dynamicity of literary tradition and assessment of

literary genres<sup>8</sup>. So, the words in literary texts can positively influence the children's language acquisition and skill of appropriate diction.

Two decades ago, using literature for teaching the four language skills –writing, reading, speaking and listening- and grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation has become very popular in teaching and learning FL.

Hadaway *et al.* (2002) suggest three advantages of using literature for teaching language. The first advantage is about the contextualization of language. Students get familiar with the application of language in various conditions when they read literary texts. The second one deals with social factors which are embedded in different genres of literature. The third advantage is related to the natural and meaningful application of language which is accomplished via illustrations and use of descriptive language in literature<sup>9</sup>.

According to Obediat (1997), literature can help learners obtain competence in the target language (TL), learn the usage of idiomatic expressions, speak accurately, and become more fluent and creative in the TL<sup>10</sup>. In addition, Castodio and suton (1998) believe that literature opens doors of opportunity and permits learners to criticize and investigate any discourse<sup>11</sup>. Hence, literature is an authentic material for learning languages. If the learners achieve this

material, then they will be able to internalize the language at high level<sup>12</sup>.

Collie and Slater (1990) think that there are many causes of using literary texts for teaching language. These factors are genuine material, cultural enhancement, and language enhancement and personal participation. Moreover, universality, non-triviality, variety, interest and creativity are some other factors for using literature in language teaching<sup>13</sup>. In addition, Duff and Maley (1990) argue that literature is used in the TFL classroom for three reasons. Firstly, as a linguistic cause, literature is influential in language teaching since it provides the students with real samples of language contexts.

Secondly, as a methodological factor, literary works enables the learners to be creative and motivated to interact with the text message and the teacher via the class discussion.

Thirdly, since some authors express their real life situation, the students can be familiar with their individual experience and make a relationship with them and their own life. Hence, Literature provides motivation to the readers via the authentic texts<sup>14</sup>.

### **3. The Translation of Literary Texts: Difficulties and Tips**

Translation is the process of replacing source language (SL) textual materials by equivalent target language (TL) textual ones<sup>15</sup>. Lotfipour-Saedi (1992) studied in details the issue of literary translation where he believes that the translator should recognize the concept of literary function (effect) in terms of the way of utilizing language items (grammar, sound, meaning) by the author for literary purposes<sup>16</sup>.

According to him, in order to achieve correct translation equivalence, the translator should be aware of seven components. (1) *Vocabulary*: he/she must recognise the

shades of meaning reflected in the SL lexical term including denotative, connotative, stylistic, contrastive, reflected, implicative and figurative meaning. Also, he/she needs to know that the relationship between the lexical forms and their meaning (substance) differ from one language to another so that different strategies may be employed for the lexicalization of the same meaning. Hence, the translator must consider the context of the word utilization. (2) *Structure*: in the process of replacing the SL structure by its TL equivalent, the translator should refer to the communicative goal mediated by the structure as his/her guide to present that goal in the TL because languages differ in the number of their structural/grammatical elements and their communicative value. (3) *Texture*: some textual features must be dealt with in translation as “schematization strategies” or the theme of the author; “textual schematic structures” that refer to the overall structure or macro-structure of the text; “textual cohesion;” and “paralanguage” which includes intonation, stress (in spoken text) and underlining, italicizing (in written text). So, these textual strategies affect discourse comprehension. (4) *Degree of indirection*: it is the direct/indirect relationship between the “form” and the “function.” It is affected by the change in the function of textual features as mood and transitivity. (5) *Language variety*: the social, interpersonal, and registerial features reflect various language varieties. (6) *Cognitive effect*: it deals with the degree of “comprehensibility” and “recallability” of a text which must be preserved in translation. (7) *Aesthetic effect*: translating figurative language requires the translator to be familiar with cultural aspects related to the SL<sup>17</sup>.

However, translating literary texts is a challenge for FL learners because of many reasons. In this regard, Strong Cincotta (1995) says:

The challenges include such issues as cultural difference, specialized vocabulary, authors' use of plays on words, the translation of dialects within a standard language text, the interpretation and translation of ambiguities, the question of literary translation as an art form and the delicate balance between the translator's duty to accuracy and her/his duty to art<sup>18</sup>.

So, frequent reading plays an important role in training the learners to easily translate literary text: it is not useful for them to use the dictionary each time they read a text. This may interrupt the flow of thought related to understanding the whole meaning of a specific idea. So, they must be trained to get the meaning from the context not the dictionary.

More importantly, translation of word by word is not always appropriate in the case of literature because the use of figures of speech, for example, and their translation is closely related to the social atmosphere of the author and his/her characters. Irony, metaphor, and simile are generally created from the deep culture of the writer and their meaning differ from one society to another: as an example, the expression "*You have warmed my heart*" is used in English to express happy news and linked to the geographical nature of European countries where people live in a cold weather and they prefer hotness. However, its translation into Arabic is "لقد أتلتجت صدري" and it is completely different to English where the Arabic people live in hotness in the Arabian Peninsula.

Hence, the learners have to be aware of the close relationship between language and culture where the social norms affect its structure. A literary text is one of the main contexts where the language and the dialogue of the characters represent the various communities and daily expressions that only native speakers can understand them perfectly and the foreign students must be familiar with their language and culture in order to understand them. Also, figures of speech are used by the author to transmit his/her messages implicitly. So, it is the role of the reader to be competent to translate them successfully in order to be able to read between the lines

However, as beginners, non-native students could not realize that other cultures could have different perception, comprehension and interpretation forms in literary works. As a result, they will approach such texts in terms of their own comprehension skills (world vision) and pre-knowledge of that TL<sup>19</sup>. Also, works of literature involve many examples of linguistic excellence and provide an opportunity to transmit social knowledge to readers<sup>20</sup>. For example, in the short story *Eveline* from *Dubliners*, written by James Joyce, the name of the main character "Eveline" comes from "eve" which means the period or day before an important event or in Arabic (الفترة التي تسبق). This is the lexical translation of the term; however, it has a specific meaning in the story related to the culture of the Christian society. In other words, "Eveline" refers to what is called the 'Eve Day' which means the 31<sup>st</sup> day of December (the last day before the New Year that is known for the Christians as the Christmas Day). Here, Eveline knows just about her hard times in Dublin and has no idea about her future when she will leave the city. Hence, Eveline is like the last day of

December when people do not know what will happen in the future after this day. So, the translation of the word from the dictionary is not enough to understand the theme of the story, and the students need to be familiar with the characters' culture that has a close relationship with their language.

Another example about the difficulty of translating literary texts is related to the use of symbolism by the author to transmit a specific message implicitly. In *Eveline*, James Joyce repeated the word "the sea." It is easy for the students to translate this word into their mother tongue. However, the sea can symbolise many senses as danger, life with its difficulty, a refuge for telling secrets, etc. In this short story, the sea is a symbol of the future and the destiny of Eveline because she decides to leave home to another city. Also, the repeated words "brown" and "dust" refer to the difficult and unhappy life of Eveline. Hence, the readers need to put the translated word in its appropriate context to be understood correctly. In the light of this, Pollock (1965) states: "*The difference between symbols used as propaganda and symbols used as literature is found [...] not in the form of the utterance, but in the interaction.*"<sup>21</sup>

Metaphorical expressions also require the students' high concentration in translating them. If a learner translated, word by word, the expression *it is raining cats and dogs* does,

the result would be (إنها تمطر قطط و كلاب). However, the meaning is wrong because it is a metaphor which means that it is raining heavily. So, the correct translation is (إنها تمطر بغزارة). Furthermore, some words in English have the same spelling and different meanings so that the readers may fail to translate them according to their appropriate context: the sentence *they can fish* may have two meanings. First, "can" is a modal and

the expression means the ability to do the action of fishing. Second, "can" is to put fish into a closed metal container.

In designing language teaching materials, it is not quite common to find authentic literary works at beginner's or elementary levels since the learners cannot handle with the overall properties of them. In this regard, Kramsch (1985) posits: "*Learners often perceive an unfair gap between the literary selections of the second year and the readings they were offered at the elementary level, where meaning of the text seemed coextensive with the dictionary translation of its constituent parts.*"<sup>22</sup>

The teacher can train his/her students to translate literary works through different exercises as preparing short texts from different novels, short stories, and poems and asking them to translate the sections. Also, he/she can consult with the teachers of other modules (as oral expression, translation, and written expression) to introduce them different types of texts (publicity models, scientific texts, newspaper articles) for translation to be compared later with the literary ones. In addition, the audio-visual materials are very effective in this case: the teacher can make the learners listen to short stories with immediate oral translation tasks. They can also watch videos about films of famous literary works with or without subtitles. Here, the students will be able to link the characters actions with their utterances so that the translation process will be easier. In other words, the translator is supposed to translate both the characters' verbal and non-verbal behavior. So, through following the progress of the audio-visual and software area, one can achieve a successful translation of cultural issues among different communities (dubbing/subtitling).

#### 4. Literary Texts and the Learners/Teachers in the FL Classroom:

The classroom of literature is useful for teaching reading, writing, listening, and speaking. As a result, the previous skills can enhance the learners' ability to translate texts through adopting enough vocabulary of FL by experience. In this regard, Assefa (2019) believes that when using literature for teaching language, the previous skills must be thought in an integrated context<sup>23</sup>.

The combination between enjoyment and language acquisition in reading literary texts is studied by Collie and Slater (1990). They think that many criteria should be taken into consideration when choosing literary texts for teaching English like the learners' level and motivation. He adds other elements as real- life experiences, desires and emotions of the students, and the language difficulty<sup>24</sup>.

In her article, Assefa (2019) highlights the close relationship between literary texts and the reading skills. In this regard, she explains this view in details where she provides a logical analysis about the issue:

In reading classes, the teacher can begin the discussion via questions about the setting, characters and plot of the selected texts. When learners have literal understanding, then they can go to the inferential level in which they should have some investigations and interpretations of characters, setting and themes as well as the authors' point of view. After understanding a literary text, both literarily and inferentially, learners pass to a group work in which they can share their assessments. The individual evaluation motivates the learners to activate their imagination about the work and even find some solutions to their problems<sup>25</sup>.

Also, the learners can be well-trained in improving their writing skill. To be clear, they practice this skill via writing a full analysis of the texts, and they can recognize the different rules of English when reading them. At the same time, they acquire vocabulary and grammatical rules in the target discourse.

Assefa (2019) adds that the development of the students' listening and speaking should be among the main interests of the teacher of literature. She posits: "*Activities like oral reading, dramatization, pantomiming, discussion and group activities can be considered as*

*the ways through which language teachers can improve the students' listening and speaking.*"<sup>26</sup>

Training the learners to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar vocabulary concept from the context can be developed through the different genres of literature. They ensure to the learners various language contexts, through the characters dialogue, to discover the sense of the new words<sup>27</sup>. To be clear, the teacher needs to train the students to get rid of the dictionary because it reduces their concentration about understanding the meaning of the characters dialogue.

The four skills of learning language can be developed via all the literary genres (prose, poems, and theatre). Poetry, for example, is a significant one in this field. Its benefits of teaching/learning FL are as follows: (1) providing learners with different viewpoints towards language applications; (2) motivating the learners for personal interpretations and explanations; (3) evoking emotions and ideas in both heart and mind; (4) making the learner familiar with figures of speech (metaphor, simile, etc.)<sup>28</sup>

According to Cubukcu (2001), poetry can raise the students' desire of learning FL with its elements of rhythm conveying love and

appreciation for the sound and power of language. Hence, the learners could be familiar with aspects as stress, pitch, and intonation of the FL through practicing reading poetry<sup>29</sup>.

The short story can also be an effective atmosphere for language learning where the characters play authentically and symbolically, as individuals do in their daily life: short stories mirror and illuminate human lives with their daily language and behavior that convey that language. In FL classes, stories have advantages as: (a) facilitating the learners' reading task because of being short and simple in comparison with other literary genres; (b) Offering a world of wonders and mystery; (c) developing critical thinking ability<sup>30</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, literary texts help the learners to improve their skills of communication in the FL. Students attain new sentence and phrasal patterns through reading literary works. They learn to use familiar words in new contexts with new meanings. In other words, "*The English language is no longer the preserve of a few*

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*nations, but is now used globally.*"<sup>31</sup> So, foreign literary works of native writers must be included in the syllabus design.

Researchers think that it is necessary also to select themes that the students are asked to recognize. On the other hand, Kramsch (1985) dealt with other features that a teacher may consider when selecting literary texts. These criteria are summarized in her following questions:

- Does the text lend itself more to an efferent or an aesthetic kind of reading?
- Is the narrative structure predictable or unpredictable?

- Are the cultural allusions clear or unclear to foreign readers?

- Are the silences in the text understandable to foreign readers?<sup>32</sup>

In addition, literary texts can be selected in terms of the social and cultural environment (texts dealing with human relations, sexual relations, sexual orientation, drugs, alcohol, racism, loneliness, fear, bullying, violence, dying, etc.), it can be a useful material for enhancing language learning and providing the students with appropriate lexical and communicative abilities<sup>33</sup>.

Here, Leech and Short (1998) explained deeply the different clues of politeness, in literary texts, that differ from one social context to another. They believe that the study of the techniques of communication is needed in the style analysis of literary texts<sup>34</sup>.

In literary texts, Minnick (date unknown) has been interested in studying spoken language variation (dialects), African American English speech in particular. That is to say, literature, language, and social contexts are interrelated in the sense that literature was considered as offering a privileged and prestigious access to distinct national civilization and languages<sup>35</sup>. Thus, literature is considered as a source of formal expressions related to a given community<sup>36</sup>.

Hence, the teachers need to prepare carefully their learners to the foreign literature classroom. They have to be aware about the sample of their students at all language learning levels.



## 5. Conclusion:

Reading literary texts is a fertile area for stimulating the readers' imagination and creativity. It can also be considered as an authentic material for teaching/learning language.

The characters dialogues and daily conversations are mirrors of the different foreign social contexts where the target language is experienced.

In the literature classroom, the teachers role is more complicated because he/she needs to pay attention to the text selection and to the sample of his/her students. In other words, the case of beginner learners is not the same as that of the advanced ones: in the first state, the text language must be less complex than the second situation. Also, its length should be taken into consideration where short stories are preferred than novels in the case of beginners. It is also needed to prepare a pre-test for the students, at the level of vocabulary and grammatical structures, before introducing them the literature session. This kind of tests enables the teacher to select his/her teaching materials and texts.

So, keeping and encouraging the learners enjoyment of literary texts is not an easy task and it should be both the role of the teacher and the students to improve their (the learners) language skills to be ready for receiving the message of the author via translating the discourse successfully.

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