

An Analysis of University Teachers' Practices and Beliefs Regarding the Teaching of Literature: The Case of Prose Pieces

Amel BENAÏSSA ^{*1}, Fatma Zohra NEDJAI MEBTOUCHE ²

¹ University Mouloud Mammeri Tizi-Ouzou, (Algeria), benaissaam@hotmail.fr

² Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts- (Algeria), conferencegender@gmail.com

Date of submission: 16/09/2022

Date of acceptance 22/01/2024

Date of publication: 26/01/2024

Abstract :

The present research aims at investigating some university teachers' practices and beliefs of how and why literature should be integrated into the EFL program. Though teachers' beliefs and practices, as new lines of research, have provided illuminating insights on the relationship between teachers' assumptions and their instructional strategies, their relation to teaching literature for foreign language learners remain relatively scarce. To reach the goals of the present research, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 15 university teachers. A further attempt was made to see if there was any discrepancy between their tacit assumptions and their current instructional practices.

Keywords: Literature; teachers' beliefs; teachers' practices

*Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

Literature has always been part of foreign language curricula. However, the role it plays in foreign language teaching has known many changes in response to new theories and methods in different teaching and learning contexts. Though teachers' beliefs and practices, as new lines of research, have provided illuminating insights on the relationship between teachers' assumptions and their instructional strategies (Entwistle & Walker, 2000, Hativa, 2000), their relation to teaching literature remain relatively scarce (Xerri, 2016). With the development of disciplines such as social sciences, linguistics, and educational psychology, literature has become increasingly 'obsolete' (Kramersch & Kramersch, 2000). The emergence of these disciplines has led to the separation of the teaching of English from the scholarship of literature in many institutions. Kramersch and Kramersch explain that

Literature has been used for the aesthetic education of the few (1910s), for the literacy of the many (1920s), for moral and vocational uplift (1930s 1940s), for ideational content (1950s), for humanistic inspiration (1960s–1970s), and for providing an “authentic” experience of the target culture (1980s–1990s)” (2000:1)

Though present in many English programs nowadays, the place of literature in the EFL classroom remains unclear. Since the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) are already taught as separate subjects in many English departments in the Algerian universities, the objectives behind teaching different literary genre, and more particularly prose pieces, are not well defined.

In light of the idea that EFL students are not literature experts and “may not as yet have developed a wish to read literature in the target language on their own initiative” (Collie & Slater, 1990: 9). Investigating the beliefs that teachers have of the importance of literature and the way it should be taught is of considerable value. It is believed that such factors can determine the mediation between students and literature in the classroom.

Though a considerable amount of research already exists in this field of research, with the aim of identifying teachers' general conceptions and beliefs of how a foreign language should be learned and taught (Entwistle & Walker, 2000, Hativa, 2000). Studies that give importance to the place of literature in EFL courses remain relatively scant. Among the few researchers who investigated the place of literary texts in university curricula of foreign languages are Alvstad and Castro (2009) and Xerri (2016).

Alvstad and Castro (2009) conducted an investigation in which they set out to identify the reasons for reading literary texts in university curricula of foreign languages. The findings of their study revealed that the literary modules within language curricula did not have its specific objectives. The researchers conclude that:

Rather than privileging linguistic and cultural competences to be trained, the literary modules could, for example, raise students' awareness of the facts that there are many ways of reading a text but that interpretation nevertheless remains a historically situated and constrained activity. (Alvstad and Castro, 2009:1).

A second research was conducted by Xerri (2016). Unlike Alvstad and Castro (2009), Xerri focused mainly on teachers' beliefs about the importance of poetry and the different approaches used to teach it. A total of eight poetry teachers took part in the investigation and every teacher was observed conducting a 60 minutes of literary criticism poetry session. The researcher concluded that though the teachers do not read a lot of poetry "they act as gatekeepers who coach their apprentices in the art of unraveling meaning" (Xerri, 2016: 226). As such, the students believe that what is expected from them is to mimic the way their teacher approaches and analysis the poem rather than enjoy its beauty.

Literature has always had a significant place in the English curriculum in many Algerian universities. The students are introduced to the subject from the first year to the third one. They are then given the choice to pursue their master degree either in linguistics or in literature studies. Though strongly and indisputably present in the English program, the objectives behind teaching literature are not always clear. The present research aims at identifying the beliefs that EFL University teachers have about the importance of teaching literature. In other words, the study intends to make explicit what is initially tacit knowledge of teachers. It also aims at unveiling their beliefs of how literature should be taught and the approaches and techniques that should be used in the EFL classroom.

On the basis of these considerations, the aim of the present study is to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. Which beliefs do EFL University teachers hold of the importance of teaching literature?
2. Which beliefs do EFL University teachers hold of the appropriate classroom approach and techniques to teach literature?

2. EFL teachers and literature

The first part of the literature review highlights some of the most important insights from the previous research on teaching literature in the EFL classroom. According to Collie and Slater (1990), a language teacher uses literary texts in the classroom for three main reasons. Literature can be used as a valuable authentic material for: language enrichment, cultural enrichment, and personal involvement.

First and foremost, literary works are referred to as authentic material since they are not fashioned for the educational purpose of teaching a language. As such, they can be more beneficial in the sense that they permit learners to “gain familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so no” (Collie and Slater, 1990: 6). Furthermore, they offer a context for lexical and syntactical aspects of language to be learned. In tune with Collie and Slater’s idea, Lazar asserts that literary texts can help learners “increase their general awareness and understanding of English” (1993: 23). Advocates of the language-based model stress the stylistic characteristics of a text in their classroom instructions. Since literary texts are rich in their styles, registers and topics, the wide selections of English texts can help improve learners’ English proficiency.

The second reason refers to cultural enrichment. In other words, literary texts offer a window to the way of life in other foreign territories. As argued by Collie and Slater “literature is perhaps best seen as a complement to other materials used to increase the foreign learner’s insight into the country whose language is being learned” (1990: 6). As such, literature is viewed as culturally authentic artifacts that can be used as a tool to deepen and broaden students’ knowledge of the target culture.

Both language and cultural enrichment are referred to as instrumental goals or literature as a means to an end by Alvstad and Castro (2009). However, these researchers argue that “promoting literature as a means to develop linguistic competence and obtain knowledge about foreign cultures are not only far from convincing, but also do not by themselves meet the standards of undergraduate education” (2009: 171). Literature can have a transformative and illuminating potential that can lead to personal enrichment. It can be used as “a useful tool for encouraging students to draw on their own experiences, feelings and opinions” (Lazar, 1993: 39).

The third reason why literature should be taught is for personal involvement. More to the point, literary texts can help learners “shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system. When a

novel, play or short story is explored over a period of time, the result is that “the reader {6} begins to ‘inhabit’ the text. He or she is drawn into the book” (Collie and Slater, 1990: 7). As such, reading literary texts can serve as a path for personal enrichment. Moreover, allowing the students to read and give their own interpretations of different literary texts can have a transformative effect on their self-growth and their cognitive abilities. This model is students-based since it capitalizes on learners’ involvement and contribution to the lesson. They can find themselves “taking on new roles, facing new situations- coming to terms in different ways new elements of oneself and new level of human experience” (Dixon, 1969 as cited in Xerri, 2016: 216).

3. Teachers’ beliefs and practices

The two terms beliefs and conceptions have been used interchangeably by many researchers. However, a distinction can be made between the two. When both are regarded as part of knowledge, beliefs can be viewed as the incontrovertible personal “truths” held by everyone, deriving from experience or from fantasy, with a strong affective and evaluative component (Pajares, 1992). Conceptions, for their part, are cognitive constructs that may be viewed as the underlying organizing frames of concepts. Entwistle, Skinner, Entwistle and Orr (2000) add another distinction between the two terms. When conception is a term that has been used mainly in North America, European studies “have looked more closely at teachers’ own ways of thinking and their beliefs about teaching” (Entwistle et al., 2000: 8).

Effective integration of literature in English language course depends on a host of factors. Among these factors are teachers’ conceptions and beliefs that in turn shape the actions and approaches that they adopt in the classroom. Marton, Dall’Alba, and Beaty, for instance, distinguish between six conceptions of learning: increase of knowledge, memorization, and application, learning as understanding, learning as seeing something in a different way, and learning as changing a person (1993 as cited in Alvtad and Castro, 2009). Table 1 best illustrate this:

Table 1: A hierarchy of conceptions of learning

Levels	Van Rossum and Schenk (1984) categorization	Description
1	Reproducing (surface approach)	Increasing one's knowledge
2		Memorizing and reproducing
3		Applying
4	Constructive (deep approach)	Understanding
5		Seeing something in a different way
6		Changing a person

Source: adapted from Van Rossum and Schenk (1984: 82)

When the first three conceptions relate to the surface approach that requires passive reception of new information, the latter refer to a deeper approach to learning that leads to active interaction with knowledge and that in turn leads to personal growth on the part of the learner.

As regards teachers' position when teaching literature in the FL classroom, Alvtad and Castro (2009) distinguish between two stances: teachers who believe that literature is a means to an end and teachers who support the idea that literature is an end in itself. When the former refers to the use of different genres as means to develop students' linguistic and cultural competence, the latter means teaching literature to "boost students' motivation to engage in extensive reading and allow students to consider reading as a pleasurable activity" (Xerri, 2016: 208). When investigating teachers' beliefs about the most suitable way to teach poetry as a literary genre, Xerri affirms that "teachers play a crucial role in inspiring young learners to enjoy poetry and the way they approach poems in class can help either stimulate a lifelong passion for the genre or an equally vehement rejection of it" (2016: 211)

4. Research methodology

The research took place at Mouloud Mammeri University in Algeria and a total of ten literature teachers took part in the study. A short one-on-one interview was performed with the group of university teachers. They all held a Master or PhD degree in English literature and civilization. Their experience in teaching literature ranges between ten years and twenty years and only one teacher has a one-year experience. The participants were asked questions about their personal experience as literature teachers, their beliefs about how and why literature should be taught, and the different instructional techniques that they use with their students in the classroom.

Since such data are qualitative in nature, qualitative content analysis was used as a research tool. Unlike quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis aims at developing and following “certain principled analytical sequences without being tied to the constraints and procedures and sacrificing the researcher’s creative liberty of interpretation” (Dörnyei, 2007: 242)

MacKay and Gass (2005) provide five steps to collecting and summarizing open-ended item questions. The first step consists in gathering and transcribing data. In the second step, the researcher is required to group the data according to general categories. The third step consists in looking for ideas shared by the respondents. In the last step, the researcher has to double-check the patterns identified to see if there are any reoccurring themes. Finally, yet importantly, for each idea, two or three responses were selected as examples of teachers’ answers.

When collecting data, the researcher needs to have access to detailed information about the participants. This includes participants’ contact information such as their full name, age and gender. During data elicitation, collection, and transcription, the participants’ anonymity was protected by assigning numbers instead of names to refer to them in the research. For instance, T1 refers to the first teacher; T2 refers to the second teacher, and so on.

5. Results and discussion

The pool of diverse responses obtained from the teachers was reduced to a handful of key issues in a reliable manner. The key ideas highlighted in this phase were coded verbatim with the aim of providing concrete examples and illustrations of the participants’ statements.

5.1. Teachers' motivation to teach literature

When asked about what motivates them to teach literature, most teachers confirmed that it was their passion for reading books. One teacher stated that “my motivation for teaching literature stems from my love for reading books” (T8). Another teacher added “simply because I love reading books” (T7). Another colleague agreed with and said “my passion for reading and interpreting literary texts” (T5). T6 and T2 gave similar answers. According to Day and Bamford “Effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching by example the attitudes and behaviors of a reader” (“Top Ten Principles”: 140 as cited in Xerri, 2016: 208)

Five teachers added that they chose to teach literature because it was part of their studies. Since all the teachers have either a master or a PhD degree in literature studies, they have all worked on a particular literary book during their research. In this respect, one teacher stated “literature is my specialty” (T1). A second teacher added “First, it's part of my research” (T2). Another teacher mentioned the same reason “My own studies since I prepared my magister thesis in literature” (T4). This clearly shows that these teachers are intrinsically motivated and are themselves learners and researchers in the literary field of study.

5.2. The instrumental goal of teaching literature

When asked about the long-term goals that they aim to achieve by the end of the academic year, all the teachers agree that literature is important for the development of students' language skills and cultural knowledge. For instance, one teacher explained that literature helps “elicit language acquisition and broadens the students' knowledge in many fields” (T7). Another teacher added that “the importance of literature in the English curriculum lies in the fact that it improves the students' four skills. Besides, it enriches their vocabulary and exemplifies the grammatical structures they learn in other courses” (T8). Similar answers were provided by their colleagues. For instance, one teacher explained “the students will learn about the different literary movements, authors and their works. Students will improve their reading skills and enrich their vocabulary” (T5). Another teacher stated “by the end of the academic year, students should have the necessary background knowledge about English literature in general, its different trends, and the characteristic of each literary movement” (T3). The choice of some particular words by teachers is especially important because it shows that the focus of most of the teachers is on developing students' declarative knowledge. The most recurrent action verbs used are “to enrich”, “to be acquainted with”, “to differentiate”, “to recognize”, and “to have”. This clearly

shows that these aims are content-related, with most teachers wanting to further their students' literary knowledge and enrich their vocabulary.

The results corroborate the findings of Alvtad and Castro's study (2009). After interviewing eleven university instructors, they came to, more or less, the same conclusion and affirm that "in some of the brief formulations we have received from teachers, learning is predominantly presented as an increase in knowledge, memorization, and, in some cases, application" (Alvtad and Castro, 2009: 180). The instrumental goal of teaching literature also considers literature as a promising tool for language learning purposes. Duff and Maley (1990:3) point out the authenticity of literary texts, which 'offer genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers and text-types at many levels of difficulty'. (cited in Gilroy and Parkinson, 1996). Moreover, literary texts do not only help foster EFL students' reading skills; they can also help them develop their oral and written abilities and encourage learners to become more creative and adventurous by learning to appreciate the variety of linguistic styles that they are exposed to.

5.3. The non-instrumental goal of teaching literature

Though, as initially shown in the first part of the interview, most teachers' responses indicate that their motivation to teach literature stems from their passion for reading books, making students consider reading as a pleasurable activity doesn't seem to be teachers' first priority. When asked about the long-term goals that they try to achieve by the end of the academic year, the responses confirm that most of the goals are only instrumental ones. Only one teacher explained that her aims is "to make students like literature by choosing attractive and interesting literary works that can help them develop critical thinking and analyze the literary works" (T6). To be sure, increasing students' passion for reading and creating a space where they can be part of a reading community are important goals that teachers should have.

Teachers who support the non-instrumental goal of teaching literature believe that literature should not be regarded as a mere tool for developing their students' four language skills; it should also develop their literary and cultural competences. Even more important is the all-encompassing goal of educating the whole person. Literature must involve learners in a personal way and help bring out "bring out 'different areas of world knowledge and human life within a set of covers' (Sell 1995a: 16). When reading literary works, students can even bring their personal experience and response to the events and characters of the story. Such an approach can allow learners to stimulate their imagination and develop lifelong learning skills such as critical thinking and emotional awareness.

All in all, the findings of the interview confirm that the debate persists between the two vantage points of stylistics and structuralists on the one hand and the personal approach on the other.

5.4. Teachers' practice in the classroom

When asked about the techniques that they use in the classroom to teach literature, the majority of the teachers responded that they ask their students to read different passages from different literary texts. This is followed by a question and answers session. One teacher explained “the main activity is reading a proposed literary passage which is guided with a question they are supposed to answer at the end of the reading” (T5). Another teacher stated “First, reading the works and try to understand them. Second, read about the work and make their own comments, debate in the classroom and give their own interpretations and evidence from the text” (T6). A third teacher pointed out “I propose topics to be discussed on specific themes related to the author studied in class” (T4). T2 mentioned “mostly reading texts and writing about them”. More or less similar responses were given by the other teachers. From these answers, it can be deduced that though these teachers mention both the linguistics and the cultural competence as their main goals, the classroom activities seem to be content-oriented and emphasis is put on the identification of the themes that are present in each literary works. Only one teacher mentioned briefly “the analysis of literary texts, both thematic and stylistic” (T1).

Though most teachers are fully aware of the role of literature in developing students' linguistic competence, they do not provide much detail on how they proceed to raise students' awareness of the wide assortments of English varieties that literary texts can offer. Moreover, the techniques that they use to improve their students' language skills in the classroom are not well defined. Most of the answers show that the predominant techniques used in the classroom are the ones of “debating in the classroom and giving their own interpretation and evidence from the text” (T6). This clearly shows that the language aspect is not considered in the classroom. In this respect, Widdowson affirms that language gains can be achieved only by means of literary analysis and “can only be realized if the student develops an awareness of the way language is used in literary discourse for the conveying of unique messages” (Widdowson, 2013: 76). It is thus essential for teachers to consider the way meanings are communicated by a text and use a method that “uses the apparatus of linguistic description” (Leech & Short, 1981 as cited in Xerri, 1961: 214)

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study reveal that there is a mismatch between the teachers' goals behind teaching literature and the techniques used in the classroom. The results of the first part of the questionnaire show that most of the teachers agree on the importance of equipping learners with the necessary linguistic and cultural knowledge. In other words, the instrumental goals of teaching literature are emphasized where literature is taught as a body of knowledge. However, when it comes to their actual classroom practices, though these teachers support the student-centered approach and the use of teaching techniques such as classroom interaction and debates, it is not clear as to how they help increase learners' awareness and understanding of English and how they develop and extend their literary competence.

Obviously, further research is indispensable to help confirm and generalize the results of the present findings. Based on the study process and the study results, we suggest conducting similar research with EFL learners. It is of equal importance to identify learners' beliefs and conceptions of the place of literature and how they should be integrated in the foreign language curriculum. Moreover, further research needs to be conducted to examine teachers' practices and the approaches they use to teach literature in the classroom by means of classroom observation and video recording.

7. Bibliography

- ¹⁻ Alvstad, C., & Castro, A. (2009). Conceptions of literature in university language courses. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92, ii, 170-184.
- ²⁻ Collie, J., & Stater, S. (2009). *Literature in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ³⁻ Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ⁴⁻ Entwistle, N., & Walker, P. (2000). Strategic alertness and expanded awareness within sophisticated conceptions of teaching. *Instructional Science*, 28, 335-361.
- ⁵⁻ Entwistle, N., Skinner, D., Entwistle, D & Orr, S. (2000). Conceptions and beliefs about "good teaching": An integration of contrasting research areas. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19. 01, 5-26.
- ⁶⁻ Hativa, N. (2000). Becoming a better teacher: A case of changing the pedagogical knowledge and beliefs of law professors. *Instructional Science*, 28, 491-523.

**An Analysis of University Teachers' Practices and Beliefs Regarding the Teaching of Literature:
The Case of Prose Pieces**

- ⁷⁻ Kramersch, C., & Kramersch, O. (2000). The avatars of literature in language study. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84.iv, 553-573.
- ⁸⁻ Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁹⁻ Mackey, A., & Gass, S. (2005). *Second language Research: Methodology and design*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- ¹⁰⁻ Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62. 3, 307-332.
- ¹¹⁻ Van Rossum, E. J., and S. M. Schenk. 1984. The relationship between learning conception, study strategy and learning outcome. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 54: 73-83
- ¹²⁻ Widdowson, H. G. (2013). *Stylistics and the teaching of literature*. London: Routledge.
- ¹³⁻ Xerri, D. (2016). Teachers' beliefs and literature teaching: The case of poetry. In B. Schaff., J. Schlegel., & C. Surkamp. *The Institution of English Literature: Formation and Mediation* (pp. 207-229). Vandenhock and Ruprecht GmbH & Co.

Appendix A
Teachers' Interview Guide

Dear teachers, you are kindly asked to complete this interview questions. They aim at identifying your view and beliefs about teaching literature in the classroom.

Section 1: Teachers' Conceptions of Teaching Literature

1. How long have you been teaching literature?
.....
.....
2. What has motivated you to teach literature?
.....
.....
.....
3. What is the importance of literature in the English curriculum?
.....
.....
.....
4. What are the long-term goals that you try to achieve at the end of the academic year?
.....
.....
.....
.....
5. What are the short-term goals that you try to achieve at the end of each lesson?
.....
.....
.....
.....
6. How do you think literature should be taught?
.....
.....
.....
.....
7. What knowledge do you expect your students to have?
.....
.....
.....
.....

8. Which skills do you expect your students to master?

.....
.....
.....

9. Which literary genre do you think is more important in the LMD program?

.....
.....
.....

10. Why?

.....
.....
.....

Section 2: Teachers' Practices in the Classroom

1. Are there individuals in your entourage who have influenced your way of teaching literature?

Yes No

2. If yes, how? Can you illustrate?

.....
.....
.....
.....

3. How do you prepare your lessons?

.....
.....
.....

4. How do you plan and organize your lessons?

5.

.....
.....
.....

6. Which role do you play in the classroom?

7.

.....
.....
.....
.....

8. Which role do your students play in the classroom?

.....
.....
.....

9. What kind of activities do you use with your students in the classroom?

.....
.....
.....

10. Do you assess your student in the classroom?

Yes No

11. If yes, how?

.....
.....
.....

12. Which literary genres do you use in the classroom?

.....
.....
.....

13. How do you use them?

.....
.....
.....

14. What are the skills and knowledge that prose pieces can help gain?

.....
.....
.....

15. Can you illustrate with some concrete examples?

.....
.....
.....

Thank you for your collaboration!