# APPROACHES TO TEACHING LITERATURE IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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*Abstract: Students read less and less and illiteracy is an increasing phenomenon in our society. This study is an attempt to prove that literature is still useful and necessary in the personal and professional growth of youth and of all individuals. We have also tried to understand the reasons why students don`t read anymore and also to discuss the relevance of selected texts and teaching methods used by teachers. The sample of our study consists of students enrolled in the study programme Romanian Language and Literature & English Language and Literature of "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad.*

*Keywords: literature, literary competence, teaching literature, EFL.*

## Introduction

Literature and reading in general are a controversial topic of our times. Teachers claim that students read less and less, while students argue that the books they are supposed to read for exams have out-dated topics. Researchers have also different opinions about the usefulness and effectiveness 0of teaching literature, especially in English as a Foreign Language classes. Most of them consider that the language used in literary works is too complex and difficult and therefore it does not support students in the acquisition of grammar and lexical structures that can be used in their everyday lives or as Kay posits, it does not meet their academic or occupational needs (Kay, 1982). There are also researchers (Aina: 1979) who believe that literature can be taught in an integrated manner, thus transcending the limitations of one school subject. Language can be taught by focusing on the development of four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing or it can be taught by integrating ideas and themes from various subjects. We believe that literature should not be considered a mere tool of developing these four competences but it should develop the students` literary and cultural competences as well. Coenen (1992) believes that a reader who is literary competent is able to communicate with and about literature. Novice readers are sometimes confused by metaphorical or symbolical uses of words and therefore literary competence is the mastery of roles and norms of the literary discourse. Each piece of literature demands knowledge of certain norms. They can be learnt only by attending lectures in literature.

Over the years, the role and approach of literature in the language classroom has constantly changed. In the Grammar-Translation Method literature was used for teaching a foreign language because the language used in literary works was considered grammatically accurate. After GTM literature has gradually lost its importance in the EFL classroom. Scholars believed that the language used in literature is not the same with the one used in everyday life and that students should be encouraged to develop their communicative skills. Thus, the Communicative approach to language teaching focused on the study of language for practical purposes. They believed that literature has no place in the language classroom as it does not have a practical use. Literature was considered a potentially disruptive influence in the well-ordered world of language courses (Widdowson, 1984:161). However, Widdowson pleaded for literature in the language classroom as language courses should also educate the youth and not just train them in a certain field. Therefore, in the 80`s due to several linguists and scholars literature regained its place in the EFL classroom. The scholars considered,



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however, that literature should be taught using a different pedagogical approach for non-native speakers.

In our country, the teaching of literature in EFL classrooms is partly neglected or reduced to language development rather than to the students` literary development. The textbooks contain extracts from novels and short stories but the focus is on the language. Therefore, typical exercises used in high schools are the following:

- ✓ rephrasing exercises
- ✓ vocabulary exercises
- ✓ sentence structure and substitution exercises
- ✓ grammar exercises
- ✓ plot, character exercises
- ✓ open exercises
- ✓

**Background of the study**

Scholars have developed three main approaches to teaching literature (Carter and Long, 1991:2). They are the language model, the cultural model and the personal growth model.

*The Language Model* relies on the development of students` knowledge by working with familiar grammar, lexical and discourse categories. It focuses on the way language is used in literary texts. It does not encourage creative thinking but the acquisition of information related to the target text. This approach is considered too mechanistic and it demotivates the pleasure of reading literature. Texts are approached in a systematic and methodological manner and the techniques used in working with these texts are typical for a EFL classroom: prediction exercises, jumbled sentences, summaries, role-play, etc.

*The Cultural Model* encourages and teachers students how to deal with a literary work in relation to the target language. In my opinion it is also a transdisciplinary approach to teaching as it does not focus on mere language acquisition but also on the knowledge of a country`s culture and ideologies. It helps students go beyond the lexis to other components of a nation. Students are asked to explore and interpret the social, political, literary and historical context of a text (Yimwilai, 2015:15).

*The Personal Growth Model* is an attempt to create a link between the language model and the cultural model. The focus is placed on the use of language but used in a specific cultural context. Students are not only passive receivers of teacher given interpretations but they have to be intellectually and emotionally engaged in the lesson and especially in the reading activity. Literature is used as a *resource* and not just a study subject. In other words (Carter and Long, 1991: 3-4) students develop their knowledge of and their knowledge about literature. During this approach to literature, students are encouraged to express their opinions and beliefs, to make connections between their own experiences and the text and use critical thinking. Therefore, teachers should take into consideration a few aspects when choosing their teaching materials:

- ✓ texts should be interesting and appropriate for the students` age and interests;
- ✓ they should facilitate students' personal discovery and involvement in the text;
- ✓ they should be a resource which contributes to the students` personal growth
- ✓ lessons should be student centred as encouraged by learner centred curriculum (Nunan, 1988) and teachers are only coordinators of certain activities;
- ✓ teachers should use activities that encourage students` communication and relate to their personal life. We advise teachers to use pre-reading, while-reading and after-reading activities and explore all resources that a text offers. Activities such as prediction making, jigsaw reading, matching or gap-filling, reading comprehension,



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debates and creative writings are common activities for work with literary texts in an interactive manner.

- ✓ texts should be a resource for literary and linguistic development and they shouldn`t be regarded as assessment material. If students feel the stress of examination when working with literature, they see literature just a subject that needs to be passed at the end of the course.

It is very important for teachers to understand that literature is a very sensitive subject in a digitized era. Less and less students read out of pleasure and most of them don`t read at all. Digital summaries replace printed books and if teachers don`t change their approach to literature, soon they will be the only ones who understand what they talk about. The days of teacher centred education and teaching are long gone even if some teachers don`t or don`t want to understand it. Endless data of literary genres (poetry, drama, novel, etc.), data of the socio-cultural contexts of various literary periods shouldn`t ne memorized by students because it has already been proven that they fail to use the information in interpretations of their own. They should be taught to be creative thinkers and not mere reproducers. It is mostly the teachers` fault, and the literature syllabus`s too, that students cannot think out of the box. The tenure exams have change in this respect and young teachers are asked to work with a piece of literature and not just deliver readymade information. That is one of the reasons they score so low in these exams. The study that we have conducted on 3rd year students of Aurel Vlaicu University supports our assertion. Students say that they are not taught how to work with a text because teachers deliver only theoretical lectures.

Parkinson and Thomas (2000: 9-11) posit the benefits of teaching literature. They believe that literature can provide the following:

- ✓ Linguistic model: literature provides excellent writing and linguistic diversity.
- ✓ Extension of Linguistic Competence
- ✓ Mental Training
- ✓ Authenticity: it is a linguistic material not a linguistically artificial textbook
- ✓ Open for interpretations: it can be basis for interaction;
- ✓ Memorability: especially poetry
- ✓ Cultural enrichment

As seen, the study of literature in high schools and universities is essential for the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge of the foreign language.

**Research**

The sample of this study consists of 47, 2 male and 45 female students aged between 21 and 30 enrolled in the study programme Romanian Language and Literature & English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad. They are 3rd year students facing the graduation exam and the tenure exam, which consists also of an assessment of their knowledge of literature.

Data were collected using the questionnaire method and the focus group. The questionnaire is an instrument for the collection of data, usually in written form consisting of open and/or closed questions (Nunan, 1992:231). Focus group was also used in our research but the most reliable source was the questionnaire because it was individual and anonymous, thus giving students confidence.

During the focus group discussions we have tried to collect data on the students` attitude towards reading, their opinion about the selection of texts and teaching methods used by literature teachers, their perception of learning literature, the relevance of text selection for their tenure preparation, the students` involvement in text interpretation, etc. The answers were sometimes evasive, especially when they had to discuss the teaching methods selection and the relevance of the selected texts.



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The questionnaire, however, offered us a clear view on the topic.

Before analysing the data, we want to make a short presentation of the study programme *Romanian Language and Literature & English Language and Literature* in terms of syllabus organization. It can be divided into the following categories:

- Language practice: it comprises practical courses, oral expression and written expression;
- Language study: it comprises linguistics, phonetics, morphology, semantics and pragmatics but also discourse analysis.
- Literature: mostly British but also some American Literature;
- Civilization: British Civilization;
- Pedagogical module;

As said, the sample for our study consists of 47 students. The data have not been analysed according to the gender of the respondents or to their age because we haven`t found significant differences between the male and female subjects` answers. Also, the statistical weight of male respondents is insignificant (only 2 men in the 3rd year of study) and thus, their answers cannot be generalized or considered representative for their gender. In terms of age, the subjects have similar ages and no significant differences have been noticed between the age groups 21-25 and 25-30. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions (8 yes/no questions and 7 multiple choice questions). The most significant answers will be presented below.

**Results**

One of the questions referred to the ***students` attitude towards reading***. 70% consider reading useful and important, while 30% presented lack of interest for reading literature.

Another question refers to the students` perception of reading literature. The question was a M/C question and the answers are presented in chart no 2 and reveal that 40% read for language development and cultural awareness, 36% consider that reading is a challenging activity, 15% think that it is useless for their professional development and 9% consider reading boring.

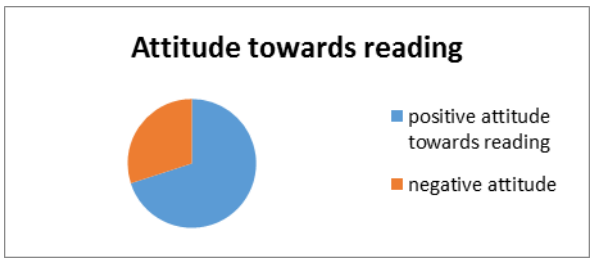



Chart no 1 – Students` attitude towards reading

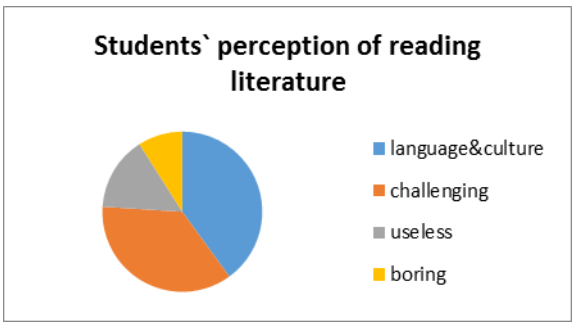



Chart no 2 – Students` perception of reading

Another question refers to the students` opinion about the selection of texts in terms of difficulty. Most students believe that literary works are too difficult for their level of language mastery and that literature such as Chaucer, Shakespeare and other classics of English Literature should be approached differently because the language used is too complicated for them. 45% believe that texts are too difficult, 37% believe that they are quite difficult and 18% consider them east. Postmodern literature is easier and they consider that postmodern texts should be used more frequently (Chart no 3). The question related to the relevance of the texts for tenure exams reveals the following: most students believe that the texts are not really relevant because they are not selected from the tenure exam bibliography. 71% believe that texts are not relevant for their exams and therefore they are not very well



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prepared while 29% consider that what they learn from these texts can be used later on at their exams (Chart no 4).

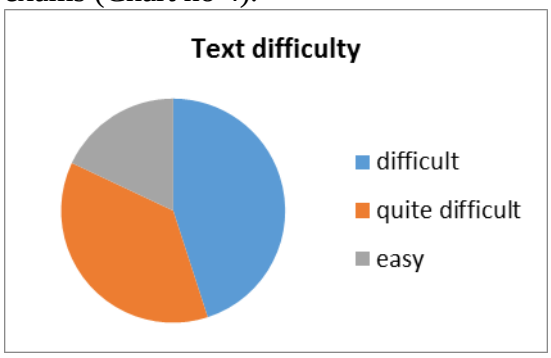



Chart no 3 – Student`s perception of text difficulty

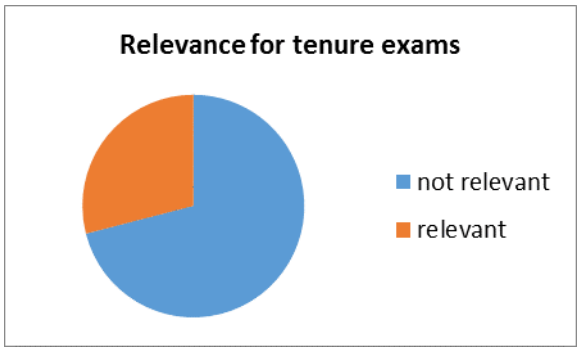



Chart no 4 – Text relevance for tenure exams

Another important topic is the teachers` manner of teaching. Most students consider that literature lectures are teacher centred and the only student activity is note taking. They would like to change literature course into debates on the selected texts and consider that they should be allowed to express their opinion about texts. For the question referring to students` interpretation of the text, the answers are distributed as follows: 43% say that they are never asked for their opinion about the text and for their personal interpretation, 26% say they are rarely asked, 20% are sometimes asked and 11% consider they are always asked (Chart no 5). It is interesting that there are students who argue that their opinion is never asked for and students who say that their opinion is always asked for. We believe that this difference is the result of students` involvement in the lecture, their knowledge of the language and of course whether they have read the book or not.

The last question that I we would like to discuss is the teachers` reaction to students` interpretation of texts. Most of them are disappointed by the teachers` rejection of their own interpretation and argue that tenure exams don`t test just their knowledge of literature criticisms but their ability to work with literary texts. Work with literary texts can be achieved only if they are allowed to use their imagination and their own interpretation. Thus, they believe that literature courses fail to train them for other exams than the exam at the end of the semester. 15% state that teachers agree to their interpretation, 32% say that teachers correct their interpretation, 53% mention that teachers reject their interpretation (Chart 6).

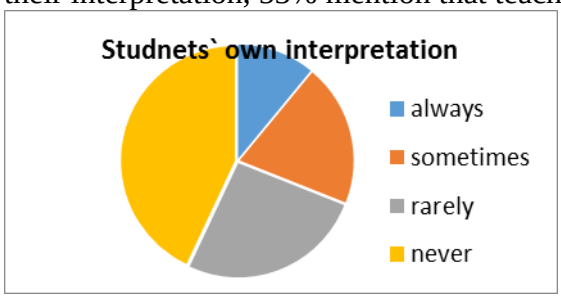



Chart no 5 – Students` own interpretation of texts

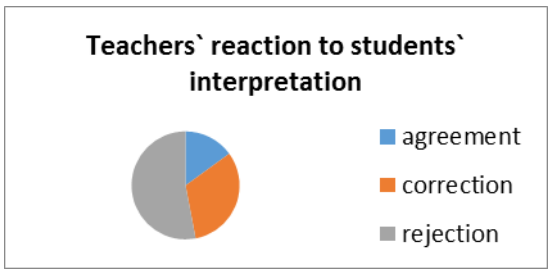



Chart no 6 – Teachers` reaction to students` interpretation

**Conclusions**

The study offered us some solutions for the encouragement of literature study. Here are some of them:

- teachers should use group work during literature seminars but also during lectures;
- texts should be interesting;
- teachers should use a wide variety of activities;



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- modern and interactive teaching methods would increase openness for reading;

Literary texts develop students` linguistic and literary skills and in the case of Romanian Language and Literature & English Language and Literature students literary texts have the following benefits:

- personal growth
- linguistic enrichment favoured by authentic texts
- literary enrichment

Universities have the advantage of being able to design their own syllabus and thus select literary texts that would suit their students` age, skills and preferences. Good novels challenge students intellectually, emotionally and linguistically. They read in dialects, in colloquial language and as Hill points out (Hill, 1989: 10-12) the informational context of situational dialogues is insufficient when students try to create their own sentences.

Literature is more than language; it is knowledge, culture and personal development.

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