

Literature in an IT context: teaching literature on non-specialist language programmes

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Literature in an IT (Institutes of Technology) context

The pedagogical value of literature in language learning within the Institutes of Technology has often been brought into question. Given that the IT structure has traditionally placed emphasis on an applied and practical approach to education, does literature have a future in the IT sector?

While literature may be considered an important language resource, it also has a broader function. It gives a valuable insight into the social and cultural conventions of the target language. The challenge for language teachers within an IT is to provide students with material they can relate to, and there is an opening here for popular literature. In addition, since the IT sector is quite technologically oriented, there is infinite scope for autonomous learning.

For educators, there is a growing concern that aliteracy is becoming more prevalent amongst students. By introducing literature within the framework of language learning, language teachers can promote both efferent and aesthetic reading.

This paper aims to examine the place of literature, if any, within Institutes of Technology in Ireland and to explore the challenges facing language teachers in terms of teaching literature on non-specialist language programmes. The broader function of literature, namely the development of an awareness of diversity (Alvermann and Phelps 2001) will also be discussed. Finally, there is an increasing prevalence of aliteracy in all sectors of society and this article will consider the implications of this within education in the Institutes of Technology.

Accessibility

The pedagogical value of literature in language learning within the Institutes of Technology has been the subject of an ongoing debate

for many years. Given that the IT structure has traditionally placed considerable emphasis on an applied and practical education, one could ask is there a place for literature at all, and if so, is there a need for a different approach from that used traditionally in the university sector? In order to identify the current trends and issues regarding literature on applied language programmes, we conducted a survey among colleagues across the Institutes. Seventy-five percent of the lecturers questioned in the survey felt that literature was worthwhile and that their students perceived it as a positive learning experience. Students surveyed within Athlone Institute of Technology confirmed the notion that literature was a welcome addition to the applied language curriculum, indicating that [literature was] 'good for learning vocabulary and structures', 'a break from the usual stuff', and 'a good source of culture'. Students further commented that '[they could] learn language that they wouldn't otherwise learn' and that 'contemporary material is good'.

A number of students also felt that literature was 'intimidating' and the misconception that it was only for those studying on a specialist language programme was prevalent. Alvermann and Phelps (2001) recommend that teachers wishing to include literature on an applied language course (1) give students an opportunity to articulate [their] assumptions and expectations, (2) allow students the chance to discuss prior knowledge and exposure to literature, and (3) evaluate the students' cognitive clarity of what they expect from a literature class.

'Because young people often use personal relevance as a criterion' (Alvermann and Phelps 2001), the aim of the language teacher at the outset should be to provide students with material they can relate to. A key ingredient in the success of teaching literature seems therefore to be the accessibility of the material and the suitability of the methodology chosen. There is an opening for popular literature here, as it often deals with topics relevant to today's society. Romain Gary's (1975) *La Vie devant soi* and Caroline Link's (1997) *Jenseits der Stille* are two examples of contemporary texts used successfully on the language curricula in Athlone. These texts deal with issues such as cultural diversity, marginalization, and disability, which are increasingly pertinent in the Ireland of today. Such authentic material serves to stimulate discussion and gives students scope to express their opinions spontaneously and

to exchange points of view. They empathize with the characters and concentrate on the meaning as opposed to the language exclusively. The theme or plot also provides students with an insight into emotions and human experience, which are often absent from theoretical or factual documents. There is more emphasis on authentic contexts rather than contrived texts, so that a meaningful message is being communicated.

Student-centred approach

Thus, the traditionally teacher-oriented environment gives way to a more student-centred, interactive way of learning, which allows for the use of the communicative approach – a relatively new concept in the teaching of literature. The role of the teacher is to facilitate reflective thinking and to encourage students to become active readers, i.e., 'using multiple strategies, self-questioning, monitoring, organizing and interacting with peers' (Alvermann and Phelps 2001).

The concept of autonomous learning provides the teacher with the necessary framework to achieve this. Since autonomous learning has become increasingly synonymous with technology — and in recent years the third-level sector has been placing considerable emphasis on the use of technology in education — there is almost infinite scope for autonomous learning within the Institutes of Technology.

Students are already receptive to technology as a valid learning tool and using technology as a way of promoting autonomous learning enables students to take responsibility for their own learning. The idea that they are more in control of their learning provides them with the impetus to learn and experiment further. More specifically, in terms of using technology for literature, students can follow up on cultural references, access biographical details, and write their own literary reviews. In this instance, a definite move from the traditionally teacher-centred method to the student-centred approach is visible, and teacher talking-time is reduced dramatically.

Cross-cultural knowledge

In the survey carried out across the IT sector, lecturers were also asked to rank in order of importance their grounds for using literature. Cultural knowledge featured as one of the main reasons

(followed closely by textual analysis and literacy skills). Therefore, literature is not only an important language resource, a means of refining language skills; it also has a broader function, in that it acts as a vehicle for the integration of cross-cultural knowledge into language teaching. The social and cultural conventions, which govern the target language, are easily identifiable in many literary texts and are an inherent part of language learning. Philip A. Thompson, Professor of Communications from West Chester University, stated that, 'so much of our culture is embedded in literature' (Weeks 2001), thus illustrating the value of literature as a pedagogical resource. It enables students to see the language of a particular social group in a natural environment. Contextualizing the language makes it more realistic, as students see it as a means of communicating a message and not simply a textbook language.

Literature underlines not only the differences but also the similarities that exist from one culture to another and allows the language educator to dispel misconceptions surrounding the target language culture and build on students' previous knowledge. Their perceptions of the target language culture may or may not be based on real experience, but the language teacher should take time to discuss the students' knowledge and perceptions, and to integrate the new into the existing information.

Recent research has suggested that the emphasis in language teaching should be on producing 'capable traveller[s]' as opposed to students with 'native (or near-native) competence' (Kelly 1998). Although this is quite a change from the traditional view of language teaching, it may be considered a more realistic objective. By exploring literary texts the students (potential 'capable travellers') acquire a socio-cultural competence and are thus equipped with 'the ability to understand and deal with cultural differences without ethnocentricity' (Byram 1997).

Aliteracy

The phenomenon of aliteracy is becoming increasingly prevalent across all sectors of society and should be of particular interest to teachers. Aliteracy can be defined as 'the quality or state of being able to read but uninterested in doing so' (Merriam-Webster OnLine) and, according to Weeks (2001), aliteracy 'is like an invisible liquid, seeping through our culture, nigh impossible to pinpoint or defend against'. For educators who are confronted with

this problem on a regular basis, the trend away from the written word is a cause for concern, since 'aliterate students are missing out on [their] cultural heritage' (Weeks 2001). By introducing literature within the framework of language learning, language teachers can offer students a threefold opportunity to: (1) improve their general language skills, (2) increase their cross-cultural awareness, and (3) become efferent readers. Efferent reading is 'purposeful reading', where one 'connect[s] cognitively with the words [in a text] and plan[s] to take something useful from it, such as answers for a test' (Weeks 2001). It 'focuses attention on public meaning – what is to be recalled, paraphrased, acted on, and analysed' (Alvermann and Phelps 2001), yet encourages the student to become more involved in the literary experience.

While efferent reading refers to purposeful reading, aesthetic reading is reading for sheer pleasure. 'Aesthetic readers connect emotionally to the story' (Weeks 2001) and there is a shift from a surface (atomistic) to a deeper (holistic) approach to reading. 'The reader's selective attention is focused primarily on what is being personally lived through, cognitively and affectively, during the reading event' (Alvermann and Phelps 2001).

Kylene Beers has suggested that a student who is aliterate leaving the education system will probably never become a habitual reader (Weeks 2001), hence the importance of encouraging students, while in education, to become accomplished readers.

Since the educational objectives of the Institutes of Technology differ from those of the universities, it is appropriate to suggest a different approach to literature on non-specialist language programmes. In order for the learning experience in this area to be a success, the implicit involvement of the students is imperative and the careful selection of literary material crucial. Knowledge of literature enables students to develop greater self-awareness and offers them the possibility of enjoying 'difference and diversity', and 'a more inclusive concept of personal identity' (Kelly 1998).

References

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