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The Place of Literature in an English Language Teaching Program: What Do Students Think About It?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes and opinions of students towards the use and place of literature course in language teaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 groups of students: (a) the students who had not taken any literature courses before ($n = 7$), (b) the students who were taking a literature course at the time of the study ($n = 7$), (c) the students who took the course recently ($n = 6$). The interviews included questions about the place, importance, and use of literature. The results of the study revealed that the students had mixed views about the use of literature and had some reservations about its inclusion in the mandatory course catalogue. However, it would also appear that many students, particularly those who are currently enrolled in a literature class, understand the logic and even the importance of its use. From here we draw conclusions as to how educators can approach the use of literature as a learning tool when assuming the presence of such varied student preconceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Starting from the role of classical literary texts used for language teaching purposes in the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) in the 19th century, the use of literature for language teaching purposes has been an important issue in language teaching. They were the main classroom materials students tried to understand and translate during the time GTM was a popular method. With the emergence of some approaches like the Direct Method and Audiolingualism, literary texts were no longer in the language classrooms due to the emphasis put on spoken language in language classrooms. Assuming that there are two conflicting positions about the use and place of literature in language teaching contexts, this study investigated the attitudes and opinions of three groups of *students* towards the use and place of literature course in language teaching with the help of semi-structured interviews.

Regarding the role and place of literature courses in language teaching programs, there are two different positions, namely essentialist and non-essentialist (Donato & Brooks, 2004; Edmondson, 1997; Scott & Tucker, 2002; Yuksel, 2007). Some scholars argue that studying literature may not even help the development of second language competence and proficiency (Edmondson, 1997). This non-essentialist position regards no or limited value of using literature in language teaching and argues that “it is not essential to handle literature in the interest of developing adequate L2 proficiency (...) and literary texts have no *essence* that distinguishes them from other type of texts” (Yuksel, 2007, p. 45, original emphasis).

On the other hand, an essentialist position supports the argument that the study of literature can facilitate the development of language proficiency (Lazar, 1993; McKay, 1982; Widdowson, 1984) as well as cultural awareness (Akyel & Yalcin, 1990; Ghosn, 2002; Lazar, 1993, 1994; McKay, 1982; Parkinson & Thomas, 2000; Shanahan, 1997), critical thinking (Ghosn, 2002; Lazar, 1993; Parkinson & Thomas, 2000), and motivation (Akyel & Yalcin, 1990; Ghosn, 2002; Lazar, 1993; McKay, 1982; Parkinson & Thomas, 2000) in a foreign/second language classroom. There is a growing body of books, chapters, and articles about the value of literature in foreign language teaching programs. In the 1980s, a lot of research was conducted with a view to identifying the role of literary texts in the language classrooms (Collie & Slater, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Widdowson, 1983). Some practitioners believe that literary texts should be used for language teaching purposes for a number of reasons. Carter & Long (1991) considered the study of literature as “a sine qua non for the truly educated person” (p. 1). Lazar (1993) stated that literature should be used in the language classroom because:

1. It is very motivating.
2. It is authentic material.
3. It has general educational value.
4. It is found in many syllabuses.
5. It helps students to understand another culture.
6. It is a stimulus for language acquisition.
7. It develops students’ interpretative abilities.
8. Students enjoy it and it is fun.
9. It is highly valued and has a high status.
10. It expands students’ language awareness.
11. It encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings.

Similarly, McKay (1982) claims that one of the most important contributions of using literature for language teaching purposes is that “literature presents language in discourse” (p. 530), which will exemplify why a specific language form should be used and in this way it will contribute to the development of students’ language awareness. In addition to this benefit, she also mentions some other benefits such as fostering students’ reading proficiency, promoting tolerance for cultural differences, and leading to more creative students in the language classroom. Spack (1985), too, mentions the role of literature in creating more culturally-tolerant language learners and bringing about the concept of “language and cultural awareness” and she also points out that literature can serve as a stimulus for writing and composition. In the more recent literature about this topic, most authors review what has already been suggested by others so far and make some additional comments. For instance, Tasneen (2010) mentions the positive views of the students at international schools in Bangkok about the place of literary texts in the language classes. Bretz

(1990) defines the role of literature in foreign language teaching as “a springboard for the development of critical thinking and appreciation” (p. 335). Likewise, Inan (2009) claims that students will benefit from the communicative value of literary works since they will be exposed to some authentic materials.

In contrast to the positive opinions given above, there are some negative opinions associated with the use of literature for language teaching purposes (Edmondson, 1997). Because of the linguistic difficulty and the need to know about the culture of the target language, language teachers may be reluctant to benefit from the works of literature in the language classroom. Parallel to this idea, McKay (1982) states that one of the most common opinions against the use of literature for language teaching purposes is the structural complexity and unique use of language, which will not help the teaching of grammar.

On one side, the advantages and disadvantages of using literature for language teaching purposes are taken into consideration by teachers and other practitioners and on the other side, different approaches to using works of literature in the language classroom are suggested so as to overcome the difficulties stemming from the literary works as course materials. One of the most popular classifications of approaches to the use of literature is the one made by Lazar (1993). She suggests identifying the needs of learners first, and then applying the most appropriate model accordingly. In her model, three approaches are mentioned, namely language-based model, literature as content and literature as personal enrichment.

- a. *Language-based model*: This model includes integrating language and literature syllabuses, which emphasizes the use of grammar, lexis, and discourse categories to make aesthetic judgment of literary texts.
- b. *Literature as content*: In this approach, literature is the basic course content. Literary texts are analyzed in terms of their historical and cultural backgrounds, their genre, and rhetorical devices.
- c. *Literature for personal enrichment*: This approach gives students a chance to reflect on their personal experiences, opinions, and feelings. Texts are the basic stimuli for the classroom activities.

METHODOLOGY

The Setting and the Participants of the Study

The study was carried out in the in the English Language Teaching Department of Kocaeli University, Faculty of Education, in Turkey, in the Spring Term of the 2011-2012 academic year. Twenty students majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT) participated in the study and the information related to them is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Information about the Participants

Participants	N	Mean Age	%	Detailed Information about Participants
1st year	7	18.2	35	Finished a preparation year class in 2010-2011 No previous English literature courses
2nd year	7	19.8	35	Currently enrolled in a literature course

3rd year	6	21.0	30	Completed introductory English literature courses in 2010-2011
				Currently enrolled in a different literature course
TOTAL	20	19.6	100	

Procedure

A questionnaire about the place and significance of literature was prepared by the researchers. The participants answered the questions in an interview setting and the interviews were recorded, coded, and analyzed by the researchers. The sub-topics of the questionnaire include attitudes toward reading, the significance of literature as a representative of culture, possible courses as alternatives to literature in the ELT departments, whether literature should be a mandatory course, and students' own definitions of literature that might display their perceptions about literature.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of ELT department students towards reading?
2. What is the place of literature as a representative of culture?
3. What are the suggested courses as alternatives to literature courses in the ELT Departments?
4. What are the students' opinions about whether literature should be a mandatory course in the ELT Departments?
5. What are the students own definitions of "literature"?

FINDINGS

This study aimed to examine the perception of literature in an ELT program by three groups of participants: freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. We investigated the opinions of our participants about literature and its place in an ELT department before they take any literature course (freshmen), while they are taking a literature course (sophomores), and after they take a literature course (juniors). We also asked some general questions about reading and culture to have a deeper understanding of our participants' attitudes towards literature.

Attitudes toward Reading

The interviews started with a general question: "Do you like reading?" Most of our participants (90%) overwhelmingly stated that they read both in their free time and for the courses they take. When we asked about the types of the materials they read, our participants stated that they read books (80%), newspapers or websites about news (40%), blogs and other websites (10%), and other materials (comic books, pamphlets, etc.) (25%). When asked to name some authors, most students (n = 32) gave the names of authors who write primarily in English. Our participants also named 17 Turkish authors.

Significance of Literature

In our questionnaire, we gave nine aspects (cultural themes) and asked our participants to order them according to their significance to learn more about their perception and understanding of 'culture'. Our first year students listed art as the Number 1 representation of culture. Literature was Number 2, followed by news (3) and music (4). Our second year students stated that literature was the most important element of culture followed by films (2), music (3), and art (4). According to our third year students, literature had the top spot. Films (2), theater (2), and art (4) followed literature. Overall results demonstrated that the students favored literature (1) as the important representation of culture, followed by art (2), films (3), and music (4).

Table 2. Relative Significance of Literature Compared to Cultural Items as a Representation of Culture

Culture Item	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Overall
Music	4.83 (4)	3.71 (3)	6.33	4.89 (4)
Literature	2 (2)	3.43 (1)	1.5 (1)	2.37 (1)
Films	6.5	3.57 (2)	3 (2)	3.63 (3)
Television	7.67	6.29	5.33	6.42
Art	1.5 (1)	4.14 (4)	3.33 (4)	3.05 (2)
Sports	6.1	4.57	7.33	5.95
News	4.5 (3)	5.43	5.33	5.11
Theater	5.83	6.14	3 (2)	5.05
Magazines	8.17	7.71	9	8.26

Replacement of Literature

When asked about what other kinds of classes could be taught instead of literature in the ELT department, a large percentage of students (30%) responded that nothing could take literature's place. Of the students who offered alternatives, most of them suggested classes that were still literary, such as drama, cinema, or art. A plurality (40%) of the interviewees declined to answer the question.

Table 3. The Percentages of Students Offering Alternatives to Literature Classes in the ELT Department

Type of Replacement Class	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Overall
None (only literature)	2 (28%)	2 (28%)	2 (34%)	6 (30%)
Drama or other arts classes	1 (14%)	3 (44%)	2 (32%)	6 (30%)
No answer	4 (58%)	2 (28%)	2 (34%)	8 (40%)

The following comment by Student Six highlights the significance of literature the fact that it is really difficult to replace it with another course.

No, I don't think anything replace literature. Because literature reflects the life of people, and maybe art, because you can also, if you can't write, you can draw it or you can sing it or, I don't know. Literature is a part of art for me, so it doesn't comes to mind directly. Arts courses can be maybe replace literature. (Student Six, Third Year Students)

Mandatory Literature Classes

Regarding the status of the literature classes in the English Language Teaching program and the question whether they should be mandatory or elective, our participants favored mandatory literature classes (65%). The rate of the students who were in their third year overwhelmingly favored mandatory literature classes (83%).

Table 4. The Participants' Views Related to the Place of Literature Classes in the ELT Curriculum

Literature classes	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Overall
Mandatory	4 (57%)	4 (57%)	5 (83%)	13 (65%)
Elective	3 (43%)	3 (43%)	1 (17%)	7 (35%)

When asked why literature courses should be mandatory, our participants had different ideas. The following reasons were cited about mandatory literature classes:

Literature is such an important part of the language that it should be considered a core class. (Student Five, Third Year Students)

If given the choice, many students would opt not to take literature classes (due to the degree of difficulty or to general student laziness) and therefore miss out on something important. (Student Four, First Year Students)

I think it is very important for teaching especially for English teachers, that's why they shouldn't be left to electives. Because most of them will think about the grade. They must be mandatory. (Student Three, First Year Students)

I think it should be mandatory because we should know the literature of English to be effective in this job. (Student Four, Second Year Students)

Definitions of Literature

We also asked our participants to define literature with their own words. Our students' definitions of "literature" tended to be very vague. Some examples of these definitions included phrases or conceptions such as "the meaning of life," "learning and enjoying," "[it] reflects the man's soul on written papers," and "explaining your ideas in an indirect way." Some other definitions included parameters such as artistry, merit, knowledge, and culture. However, these factors were not defined further.

We observed that the definitions of literature by our participants were overall positive in tone. Most students did not appear to consider materials such as news or internet publications as "literature." The students who were currently enrolled in their first English literature class tended

to have slightly more concrete ideas as to how literature could be used as a tool for teaching English than students who had not taken literature before.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the perception of literature in an ELT program by three groups of participants: freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. We wanted to investigate the opinions of our participants about literature and its place in an ELT department before they take any literature course (freshmen), while they are taking a literature course (sophomores), and after they take a literature course (juniors). We also asked some general questions about reading and culture to have a deeper understanding of our participants' attitudes towards literature.

Our main motivation behind this study was to have more evidence in favor of or against so called essentialist and non-essentialist positions. The responses of our participants mostly highlighted the importance of literature in the English Language Teaching curriculum.

Our sample indicates that the battle to convince students of literature's importance is not so uphill. In fact, most of them are already convinced. We believe the real challenge appears to be convincing them about literature's relevance. This can be seen in the students' relative inability to imagine ways of using literature in the classroom as English language teachers or ways of benefiting from literature as English language students.

At the start of the project, we were expecting to encounter mostly negative attitudes towards literature, particularly from the students who had not yet taken a literature class. However, we were rather surprised by the relative positivity with which the students described their feelings about literature. Though quite a few of them indicated that literature was something that existed in a separate sphere from their normal lives, at the same time they recognized literature as something valuable academically, linguistically, and culturally. Literature holds little to no personal value to many of them, but they still acknowledge its significance in a language teaching program. The students used the word "important" a lot, but they did not explain what qualified something as "important." It appears that they are relying on outside authorities (teachers, the literary canon, etc.) to determine what is and is not important.

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