



Language Class Students Enjoying Literature

Giovanna Comerio finds a way to incorporate literature into every level of language class

During this era of standardized testing

and emphasis on measurable results, many language teachers think that literature has no place in any language classes, let alone those for beginners or intermediate students. However, there are opportunities to introduce literature in language classes, especially if you take a two-step-approach to the text. The first step consists of “the voices theater.” The second consists of some simple activities which allow students to get familiar with literary analysis concepts, and enjoy literature. The third part of this article illustrates an example of this approach: the reading and a simple analysis of a Primo Levi’s short story.

Literature in language classes

Literature in a language class is a challenge, and some experts have had unsatisfactory experiences: boring activities, deceptive results, exasperated students and teachers. Sometimes literature is too complex for students with basic reading skills, and it seems as though there will never be enough time for them to fully understand literary devices. However, I believe that it is possible to give students the opportunity to read literature, if we as teachers and students rethink literature’s nature, expectations, and change our

reading methods.

If we think of literature as immersion in a culture, in various ways of feeling, understanding and meaning, we realize that it can be an important source of reflection for students. If we consider literature as a multicolored expression of a world requiring cognitive and relational skills, sometimes different from the ones we are used to, then literature becomes a lens through which we can get to know that world. Furthermore, literary text does not allow us to guess meanings through paralinguistic and extra-linguistic codes, so it obliges us to focus on the language and its nature. Literature sharpens the ability to understand underlying meanings — an important skill in relationships. (Ndeh, 2002)

Therefore, there are other reasons, literary reasons, which support the use of literature in language classes.

Literature can be considered “language in situation” — authors mould and accommodate language, scattering their writing with silences, pauses, and deviations which represent the complexity of the human world. The reader can savor the diversity of meanings in a language, and can delight in the beauty of word harmony. We all remember a beautiful sentence. As Louise Rosenblatt

pointed out, literature is also — mainly — a personal experience which involves all our identity. Literature shows us lives and sensitivities; it asks us questions distant from our ordinary lives, and it allows us to imagine different answers, to think in a “what if” way. (1938, 1994)

Not to mention that in the world created by literature, emotions and experiences grow endlessly. Finally, we must remember Sartre’s view that literature is a dream and that the main trait of the reader-author relationship is freedom. “Reading is a free dream,” because the reader is free to “lend” himself to the literary work: “At any moment I can awake, and I know that; but I do not want it.” (Sartre, 2004, 57; my translation)

By stressing the aesthetic meaning of a literary text, teachers can focus on the reader-student’s personal response. Personal does not mean instinctive. It means an intuitive response clarified through cognitive categories. Students rebuild the literary text according to both their emotional and intellectual sensitivity. “The spectator’s imagination not only has a regulative function, but also a constitutive one; (...) it is asked to recompose the beautiful object beyond the artist’s traces.” (Ibid., 54, author’s translation)



Voices Theater and Literary Analysis

Usually, the student-reader's first response is: "I like it, I don't like it." This answer is crucial, as it breeds the reasoning about one's own aesthetic experience. This reflection becomes really meaningful when it is developed through an exchange with others — a class discussion and negotiations, which require more than the student's subjectivity.

The first-answer phase is important also because reading is, first of all, an experience of life, and because it motivates students to go further. The second phase is central because the text holds its own content and formal aspects, and is a mirror of the writer's beliefs. Readers may take them on board, disregard, or refute them, but they should always justify their response, and this process will enhance their aesthetic awareness. (Rosenblatt, 1939, 48-51, 75; Rosenblatt, 1956) The teacher's role is to allow students to consider the various literary, aesthetic, and cultural aspects of the work, while providing activities that permit them to elaborate on their own response.

These two phases correspond with the technique of "the voices theater" and with an "experiential" stylistic analysis.

Teachers can propose short stories written by contemporary writers; they can plan three-four hour units to add between the language units.

The concept of "voices theater" is derived from the reader's theater, but it is reduced to its key feature — the voice. Students do not dress up, do not act out, nor stage a performance. Sitting in groups, they read the literary text and decide how to perform it. Their

work involves only the voice, so oral expression alone must convey their interpretation. What do they read? And how? They read the whole work and they express feelings, and impressions by using a variety of voice intonations. A voice does not correspond just to a character or the narrator. A voice corresponds with a tonality — different voices can read a sentence to convey different meanings: "The word is the action to express thoughts, while voice is inner, it's bound to senses, to the life philosophy." (Robert Lepage interviewed by C. Charette, 2007) In this way, the text is colored by voices, tones, and modulations. As emotions and understanding come out from the author's particular style, the students' modulation expresses their early grasp of the text's main features. Students at first feel style, rhetorical features and the emotions that go with them. Devices, such as phonology characteristics, unmatched styles, syntax structure peculiarities, the use of tenses, metaphors, similes, or repetition, can be picked up more easily when reading aloud and listening to others reading.

The voices theater is a means of expressing this early understanding, which requires an intellectual interpretation by each member of the group and by the group as a whole. The class discussion — following the groups' voices theater performances — represents the passage from the groups' response to the reasoned personal response. The classroom becomes "a place for critical sharing of personal responses." (Rosenblatt, 1938, 286) Now the teacher can give students the appropriate stylistic tools to deepen their personal response. Students should be in a position

where they can autonomously use those tools — the reasoned response should not be mechanical, and they must find its roots in their own experience. These tools should help to reveal the literary and aesthetic essence of the text, the psychological and cultural allusions, and the distinctive linguistic and phonostylistic components. In the process, the reader-student becomes a cognitive, literacy builder, which is what we all are when reading or talking.

The activities should focus on the few stylistic features already singled out by the groups. At this stage, it is very important not to overload students with activities and requests. They need time to develop, not just because of their basic language skills, but also because they have little previous experience of literary analysis. The key is to follow up with some detailed activities so that students answer some precise and simple questions, which enable them to clearly see the connection between the textual, literary component and their own perceptions, emotions, and thoughts.

Some examples of such activities include underlining verbs and adjectives, and comparing them; focusing on the punctuation; analyzing the storytelling; considering the imagery; and finding repetitions or the main rhetoric features.

Using this methodology, students can be taught to read literature and actually begin to enjoy it — a far cry from the strict old school days. Use of the voices theater enables students to enjoy detailed reading, because they have a purpose: the challenge of expressing feelings through voice alone. The pleasure in