

## USING LITERATURE IN EFL CLASSES FOR TEACHERS

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**Abstract:** As a teacher who works with advanced students and English teachers, I have often used fictional literature to improve English skills, as well as to introduce teachers to canonical writers. I believe literature can not only enhance teachers' English but open fascinating questions for debates. I would like to share some practical activities I developed that used Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Given that there sometimes occurs a division between language and literature teachers, many teachers come from graduation courses in Letras without some basic knowledge of literature. But here the first problem arises: is it necessary to deal with canonical writers, i.e., dead white men, or would it be more adequate to present women, black and homosexual writers who nowadays form an alternative canon? And is it better to deal with literature superficially, due to time restraints, or not at all? There are no simple answers. I am interested in addressing the topic of how literature can help teachers' formation, even for teachers who might never teach literature.

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I have been teaching English for more than a decade now, and in most of the courses I gave I did not pick one specific textbook for my advanced EFL students. They preferred it that way, so we could debate several issues as they came, not following the agenda of an author who never met us. And in several occasions, especially among my advanced students who were also English teachers, I brought literary texts into the classroom. There was a feeling that we were doing two good things simultaneously: preparing for the Toefl test or one of the Cambridge exams, and at the same time studying great literature. This paper wishes to share some of these ideas, as well as to address the success or failure of using literature in EFL classes.

Something that has always struck me as peculiar is thinking that in my specialization course in English at Univille we had eight subjects, among them Literature, and this was further divided into Poetry, Prose and Drama. In both Poetry and Drama we had a useful potpourri of important names, but in Prose we concentrated merely on one work, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Although it is undoubtedly a fetching romance, I wondered if my twenty colleagues, all English teachers, would not have benefited more from learning about a more famous novelist. Most of my colleagues had not read Huxley, Orwell, Salinger, Steinbeck, or Twain, to name just a few. I imagined that even less canonical writers such as Alice Walker or Toni Morrison would do. But we spent several classes discussing a relatively unknown novel of 1899 written by a woman who was only then, in 1997, starting to become part of a feminist canon.

Don't get me wrong, I still don't have a fixed opinion on this. This is part of an old debate that shook the United States in the 1980s in what became known as "The Culture Wars". New academics in more progressive universities tried to bring into the

syllabus a little bit of diversity, thus including black, gay, and women writers for students to read. This encountered plenty of resistance from the conservative faculty members. Harold Bloom has a notorious stand on this. In *The Western Canon*, he criticizes those who claim that the literature we study is composed of dead white males. He says, “Livelier than you are, whoever you are, these authors were indubitably male, and I suppose ‘white’. But they are not dead, compared to any living author whosoever” (39). Bloom is certainly not one to encourage new voices in the canon.

The main problem, in my specialization at least, I think, was that my colleagues, almost all of them graduated in Languages, had not read any of these canonical writers during college. No specialization course meeting on the weekend for one year would fix that. Even worse: if those students loved English as much as they did (or else why would they become English teachers?), how come most of them had not sought great novels in English to read in their spare time?

The problem followed me in my academic career. In my masters at PGI (Pós Graduação em Inglês), at UFSC, the course is divided into Literature and Linguistics, and what we sometimes observe, pitifully, is that Linguistics students don’t much like Literature, and vice-versa. But once we finish the course, even though our diplomas come specified, everybody will be allowed to teach both Literature and Linguistics, that is, there will be Literature students teaching Linguistics, and the other way round. Granted, I don’t feel qualified to teach, say, Phonetics, and I wonder how a student who confessed to hate literature (as I’ve heard a Linguistics student say) can teach Literature. Of course this is yet another topic open to debate: if loving or loathing the subject has some influence on our teaching.

Regarding the quality of teaching, I must bring up another doubt: is there even time in the EFL classroom to deal with literature? My classes lasted two and a half hours, with a fifteen-minute interval in between (five hours a week, which is twice the average two-and-a-half-hours-a-week of most language schools) and still, when I tried to make my advanced students familiar with the plot of *Macbeth*, one witty pupil labeled my approach “Shakespeare for dummies”. Time was too short to cover the vast array of themes and plot twists of the play, let alone its language!

I must admit that I would be happy if my advanced students learned the plot of Shakespeare’s most famous plays (and the plot of many canonical novels). Sure, it would be ideal if the little we saw of the bard in class were enough to make the students go home and read the play on their own. However, that is very unlikely, since it is already difficult for native speakers of English to understand a language used five centuries ago. Gary Taylor thinks that the bard’s popularity is in decline, though he adds: “as long as the English language survives, people will be reading or listening to Shakespeare” (205). In his aptly titled article, “The Incredible Shrinking Bard”, Taylor wonders how long Shakespeare will last:

Will Shakespeare’s plays last longer than the earth? Longer than the sun? Five billion years? Five million? Five thousand? Next to five billion, five thousand may sound trivial, but the works of Homer are not even three thousand years old. Shakespeare, as yet, hasn’t even lasted five *hundred* (205).

However, regardless of how long Shakespeare lives, his legacy is still very important today. So much so that Bloom calls one of his books *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. He goes as far as affirming: “After Jesus, Hamlet is the most

cited figure in Western consciousness; no one prays to him, but no one evades him for long either” (xix).

Clearly, it can be debated why we still study Shakespeare *at all*. I think Ivo Kamps provides a good answer:

[A]s Terry Eagleton has conceded on several occasions, a new reading of a Shakespeare play—no matter how radical—is not going to bring about the revolution. Why, then, not remove Shakespeare from the curriculum and replace him with authors who better suit radical agendas? The question is naïve, and the answer is simple: because Shakespeare serves radical critics just as well as he serves conservative ones. [...] To let conservatives ‘have’ Shakespeare would be strategically stupid (20).

If there is an ongoing debate about continuing to use Shakespeare or not in college, the debate has to be gargantuan if we are to think of using him in an EFL class for advanced students. In my opinion, we should use anything that prompts an interesting discussion. And Shakespearean themes offer plenty of food for thought. But I wouldn’t much use his language in an EFL classroom, unless in a Toefl-like exercise to show students that they can understand vocabulary in context.

What is more, I do not choose who to use in class based on a canon, but on the interest of my students and how it can help their English. It does not need to be Shakespeare, it can be someone recent and pop, such as Nick Hornby. The issue is that even Hornby is part of a certain canon nowadays, or we probably wouldn’t have heard of him. I like to use his *About a Boy*, especially after it was adapted into a somewhat popular film with Hugh Grant, for comparing a book to a film always proves enticing to many students. In the book there is an excerpt describing how the protagonist, Will, spends his time. Since he doesn’t work, he divides his free time into units, and marvels at the number of activities he can choose from.

Sixty years ago, all the things Will relied on to get him through the day simply didn’t exist: there was no daytime TV, there were no videos, there were no glossy magazines and therefore no questionnaires and, though there were probably record shops, the kind of music he listened to hadn’t even been invented yet. [...] Which would have left books. Books! He would have had to get a job, almost definitely [...]. Now, though, it was easy. There was almost too much to do. You didn’t have to have a life of your own any more [...] (Hornby 16)

For this passage, I usually design a reading comprehension task that resembles the Toefl. But students have a lot to talk about, and sometimes the discussions generated by this text run over one hour and a half. For example, they talk about how the world has changed in sixty years, and what they think the world will be like in another six decades. They talk about what it would be to live without working. The derogatory phrase “Books!” adds fuel to a debate about the necessity of reading. And, finally, the most provocative sentence in this excerpt has to be the last, implying that, with so many activities, we can live other people’s lives and forget our own.

In a way, an exercise I created from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* also prompts questions about the utility of literature. In this passage, written in 1932, a savage chats with the controller of the universe about their way of life:

“But why is it [Shakespeare and other authors] prohibited?” asked the Savage.

The controller shrugged his shoulders. “Because it’s old; that’s the chief reason. We haven’t any use for old things here.”

“Even when they’re beautiful?”

“Particularly when they’re beautiful. Beauty’s attractive, and we don’t want people to be attracted by old things. We want them to like the new ones.” (Huxley 148-9)

One engaging discussion appears when I mention the date of the book. If we only focused on new authors, we certainly wouldn’t be wasting our time with this premonitory novel that Huxley wrote more than seventy years ago. But this book has so much to say. It creates a world in which people are controlled even before their birth, and brainwashed as soon as they are born. In the controller’s words, “People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get” (149). In yet another passage, a student tells the controller that he can understand why books are prohibited—they are a waste of time in a society obsessed with production and can disrupt a brainwashing process—but he fails to see why babies are conditioned to hate flowers (14). The controller patiently explains that, in the past, children were conditioned to love nature, so they would spend gasoline going to the country, but nature proved to be too cheap. Thus, now people are brainwashed to want to participate in outdoor sports that require very expensive apparatus. Looks familiar? Most of my advanced students can point out several similarities between the world shown in Huxley’s dystopia and our own. After the debates, I ask them to write an essay answering the question “In what ways, if any, are we conditioned nowadays?”

Helping students see how literature relates to their lives usually makes them like literature. I remember one teenager who complained about having to read *The Catcher in the Rye* in her high school literature class. She hated the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, because he doesn’t like to do anything. When she related this to me, I had to point out, ironically, “Yes, *so* unlike you, isn’t he?” After she started making connections between Holden’s attitudes and her own, *Catcher* became her favorite book. And with good reason. This experience made me adopt a passage from J. D. Salinger’s novel, in which Holden is chastened by his history teacher for failing the course. The passage is great because it calls attention to teacher and student relations and because of Holden’s thoughts about professors. The teacher asks Holden if he would like to read what he, Holden, wrote in his essay; Holden says no, and the narrator goes on with: “He read it anyway, though. You can’t stop a teacher when they want to do something. They just *do* it” (Salinger 11). Students normally have fun recalling and comparing their stubborn teachers.

I also like to work with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in spite of its sophisticated (and difficult) vocabulary. I point out that Nabokov can be seen as an inspiration to us all, non-native speakers of English, for English was only his third language, Russian and French coming first, and he wrote in this third language like very few native authors of English can do. Students are interested to know that Nabokov coined the terms “nymphet” and “lolitas”. As a kind of teaser to encourage them to read the novel, I give them Nabokov’s essay about the difficulties he encountered in finding a publisher for his “pornographic” book. The author’s account is amusing, and he provides plenty of ammunition for debate when he affirms that there are three taboos in American literature, the first being, obviously, pedophilia, and the others: “a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106” (314). Students enjoy analyzing each of those taboos, especially when they notice that they still apply today, and not only to literature but to American cinema as well, even though Nabokov wrote his afterword in 1956.

I surely don't have answers to all the questions I posed here. However, if I contaminated one English teacher with a bit of passion for using literature—any literature, canonical or otherwise—in the EFL classroom, I've done my job.

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