Incorporating Novels into Communicative EFL Classrooms – Learning Through Literature

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Abstract

In recent years, literature, especially the use of novels, is reappearing as a pedagogical tool in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Yet, despite its revival, textbooks remain the primary source of teaching materials, with novels performing an ancillary role in language development. In a Japanese context, Takahashi (2015) reports that literary works have been 'marginalized' in EFL instruction (p. 27). A large part of the hesitancy towards literature can be traced to concern among language practitioners that novels' elitist nature and archaic language will interfere with recent training and pedagogical developments in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focused on developing oral communication skills. Compounding these fears is an absence within the EFL profession of adequate teacher training on literature's potential role in modern language classrooms. Unfortunately, such disregards ignore an innovative approach to implementing literature in the EFL classroom, which, if done effectively, fosters a positive symbiotic relationship with CLT. Additionally, a novel's authenticity can meet the cultural, language and personal development objectives demanded of modern language classrooms. After outlining current research and perspec-

tives on literature in an EFL context, this paper introduces a recent pedagogical approach that provides educators with a blueprint for situating novels within their communicative language learning frameworks. The paper then contrasts the benefits of a reader-friendly original novel with that of a traditional textbook. Following this, practical examples of how literature can function within a CLT framework are introduced before the paper concludes with a call for greater focus on training and heightening awareness among teachers and institutions of the benefits of literature in an EFL context.

Literature Review

Until recently, enthusiasm for literature in the EFL language classroom had steadily waned since its commanding position as the 'uncontested source discipline for the teaching of modern languages' (Kramsch and Kramsch, 2000, p. 553–573) at the beginning of the 20th century. In the intervening years, various pedagogies that accompanied changes to the EFL industry, such as the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual approach and the direct method, forced literature out of mainstream classrooms. More recently, task-based learning (TBL) and communicative language teaching (CLT), focusing on oral communication through language negotiation, have pushed it further to the fringes of EFL teaching.

Although being neglected for an extended period, Maley (2001) began to observe literature's reemergence as a potential source for language learning at the turn of the millennia. Its gradual reintroduction has been gathering momentum as supporters cite its motivational qualities (Van, 2009; Hall, 2015), its language learning potential (Ghosn, 2002; Van, 2009), its function in introducing culture and its ability to develop critical thinking skills that educate the whole person (Ghosn, 2002; Van, 2009; Hall, 2015). However, there remains a paucity of research data to substantiate these claims and Hall (2015) disappointingly cites a dearth of empirical studies that would allow literature the authority to signifi-

cantly frame its relevance to language learning and developing language skills.

Studies in Japan have begun to tackle the lack of research by addressing the actual benefits of literature in the EFL classroom. Overall, the results have been encouraging and indicated that an authentic reader-friendly novel could help develop students' language proficiency and critical thinking skills. Kipling (2018) reported positive responses from students and communicative benefits through using Roald Dahl's *Matilda* as learning material in a Japanese university freshman's class. Similarly, Armstrong (2015) found that a group of 25 Japanese engineering students in his oral communication class improved their speaking skills, increased their cultural awareness, and could 'critically analyze and understand their world from a different viewpoint' (p. 16) after studying short stories. While Walsh (2021) reported cognitive stimulation among 20 high school students from engagement with various themes from a classic novel.

Despite these studies, the absence of comprehensive data allows practitioners within the EFL industry to continue questioning literature's adequacy for language learning. Parkinson and Thomas (2000) and Hall (2015) point out that a primary concern among teachers is that literary texts contain archaic and difficult language for students to comprehend, particularly less proficient ones, to comprehend. Similarly, Edmondson (1997), a leading objector, contends that literature exhibits no distinct benefits over 'history, geography, the economics or the architecture of other countries' (p. 46) in introducing cultural elements. Edmondson further downplays the uniqueness of literary texts over other language learning material such as coursebooks in activating student cognition. Finally, Edmondson (1997) adds that in extreme cases, literature in the EFL context can be counterproductive and diminish students' motivation if a teacher proceeds to lecture on themes and plots of a novel beyond their comprehension.

An additional factor impeding literature's acceptance in a language classroom is teacher development on implementing literature in their classrooms. Unfortunately, training programs focused on developing teacher education on

literature's application in communicative classrooms have not kept pace with its reemergence as a pedagogical approach. Paran (2017) hints at failings in the EFL industry by voicing concerns that language practitioners are not provided with training in teaching literature and consequently lack the confidence to use it in their teaching. Kramsch (1993) also reports that teachers, especially those primed in CLT, may question their ability to integrate literature into their classrooms. Since the introduction of CLT, most training programs have focused on developing teachers' ability to identify strategies that minimize teacher talk time while maximizing students' oral output. Historically, these two goals were incompatible with lecture-style literature classes. As a result of inadequate training, educationists primed in CLT may be suspicious or unaware of the possible benefits literature offers them in realizing their teaching goals and insecure in their ability to introduce it effectively. It is, therefore, necessary to build language practitioners' confidence and capabilities by providing training and examples of practical classroom activities on how to integrate literature within a CLT framework.

Maley (2012) offers language teachers three alternative classroom approaches to literature's study within an EFL context. The first, *Literature as Study*, is a lecture-style pedagogy that focuses on transmitting knowledge and is primarily teacher-led, with students as passive participants. According to Teranishi (2015), such lecture-style literature classes still prevail in Japanese university language programs. The second, *Literature as Resource*, resembles a coursebook as the literature functions as an exemplar of language such as vocabulary. Even though he notices the potential of these approaches, Maley (2012) is slightly critical of both for being 'to a greater or lesser degree external to the students' (p. 304) with the teacher performing the dominant role. In addition, these two approaches may severely inhibit the goals of a CLT methodology. For example, while a lecture-style class has its role within education, an instructor delivering an extended oration on the influence of the Napoleonic Wars on Jane Austen's

Pride and Prejudice would suffocate a CLT pedagogy. Similarly, if pursuing *Literature as Resource*, text selection is critical. The difficult language undoubtedly found in linguistically complex canon such as Joyce, Tolstoy, and Dickens could intimidate many EFL learners.

Subsequently, Maley (2012) proposes a third approach that he calls *Literature as Appropriation* and refers to it as 'literature from the inside out' and 'learning through literature' (p. 304). This approach offers significant potential for modernizing a novel's role within an EFL classroom. It shifts the study of literature from a pursuit traditionally exemplified by first-language lecture-style instruction to a student-centred approach capable of meeting the communicative goals of EFL classrooms. At its core, it aims to bring the story alive by transporting the students into the narrative. Typical activities involve student discussions on various themes and plots, students' performance of the story, student engagement in discourse with the characters, and students undertaking project work. Importantly for CLT advocates, most activities demand oral communication in the target language as students communicate, collaborate, and negotiate meaning from the novel. A further benefit is that this approach targets cultural understanding and promotes critical thinking skills as students encounter and discuss various cultures and themes presented within the narrative. Ultimately, students are transformed from passive to active participants by becoming more invested in their learning and taking ownership of the process. The role of the teacher also shifts dramatically from the purveyor of information to the facilitator of student autonomy.

Learning through literature offers educators a viable alternative to the traditional learning through textbooks approach in developing language, promoting cultural understanding, and activating critical skills that stimulate personal growth while adhering to the goals of CLT. While textbooks, especially in recent years, can develop some of these skills, novels also offer similar benefits to students in acquiring such competencies.

Language Development

A primary objective of EFL teaching is to facilitate language learning. In most situations, the main source of this language is presented through the course textbook (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2018). While textbooks can provide a focused guide for busy language teachers, their artificial construction for EFL learners can sometimes result in limited or biased language use as they are designed by teams of writers making judgements on the language content for target learners. One major criticism of textbooks highlighted by Hsu (2009) and Schmitt (2019) is their vocabulary selection and occurrence. Schmitt (2019) claims that textbooks tend to lack a systematic approach towards vocabulary by focusing more on language related to themes than high-frequency lexical items. Furthermore, Schmitt (2019) continues to complain that many textbooks ignore vocabulary repetition, which is critical for acquisition. Additionally, Tomlinson (2015) is heavily critical of many textbooks for lacking innovative ways to engage students with rich input that produces authentic communication. For example, a recurring feature of many textbooks is form-focused instruction with a heavy degree of repetition of target language structures that do not encourage interactive language use.

In contrast, reader-friendly authentic novels can expose students to a rich and varied authentic linguistic resource (Carter and Long, 1991). While reading a novel, students may observe naturally occurring orthography, syntax, and grammatical functions that can reinforce language learning. Studies have shown positive results in vocabulary acquisition as students are engaged in a narrative and negotiating language meaning (Hudson, 2011; Nagy, 1995; Nation, 2013). Other research (see Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991; Dupuy & Krashen, 1993) has highlighted vocabulary gains from literature by indicating an improvement in vocabulary test scores among those students who read a passage over those who had not read the same passage. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) found that Spanish EFL students reading an original novel for leisure showed 'considerable

amounts of vocabulary learning' (p. 45) on completion of the text. Similarly, discourse that is not form-focused can manifest as students engage in authentic communication through discussions on the novel's contents and exchange interpretations on related issues. Topics such as love, death, revenge, and life are intrinsically motivating to talk about as most people can relate to them.

However, an important consideration for educators is not to assume that language will be 'learned' by simple engagement with the literary piece. Pursuing language learning, such as vocabulary, may require reinforcement of lexical items through a degree of focused teaching (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2008). Findings by Walsh (2021) also emphasized the need for formalized vocabulary instruction indicating inconsistencies on vocabulary quizzes pre-and post-reading after independent reading of a novel. On some occasions, students displayed greater knowledge of words pre- than post-reading. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) also acknowledge that more significant learning could have been observed in their study if they incorporated more explicit teaching of lexical items.

Language Development *Through* Literature

Literature can function as a rich language resource by providing examples of orthographic, grammatical, and lexical rules and conventions. However, rather than having specific language items dictated to students by the teacher, *Literature as Appropriation's* ethos invites students to sample and experiment with the language to ultimately acquire ownership of it. An activity that allows students to negotiate with the text's vocabulary, increases their participation and encourages creativity is a story building activity. Here, students identify the more challenging words they encounter in the narrative and report them to the teacher. After receiving the student feedback, the teacher then produces a collated list of the lexical items. Adhering to a student-centered learning paradigm, the teacher asks the class as a whole or smaller group to explain the items to each other.

After a certain amount of time, the teacher should check for understanding and explain any outstanding unknown words. Once vocabulary understanding has been established, the students proceed to build an original story that includes most or all the vocabulary.

Ideally, the groups will not require further teacher input, but it may be necessary on some occasions to provide a context for the story. In preparation, the teacher draws four or more blank tables on the whiteboard (see Table 1 for completed ones). More tables could be added, depending on the teacher's preferences. Next, have students complete the tables by suggesting characters, genre, and location. Depending on the class dynamic, the teacher could use fictional characters, celebrities, animals, class students, or teachers. Finally, one student from each group rolls a die, and the number corresponds with the name in the

Table 1

Creating a Story- Four Completed Tables

Character 1		Character 2	
1	Mr Conway	1	Anpanman
2	Ms Cullen	2	Justin Bieber
3	Satoshi	3	Mr Hennessy
4	Ariana Grande	4	Lady Gaga
5	Bruno Mars	5	Ms Vinzwilla
6	Harry Potter	6	Totoro
Genre		Location	
1	Romance	1	School bus
2	Horror	2	New York
3	Comedy	3	Sydney
4	Science fiction	4	Hokkaido
5	Action	5	Mars
6	Historical	6	The library

space. For example, if a student rolls a five for Character 1, they have Bruno Mars as a character in their story. After four rolls, all groups should have their characters, genre, and location. The purpose of the story or short play is for students to experiment with the language and use it correctly. Therefore, the story does not necessarily have to relate to the contents of the book the students are studying. Once complete, students read or perform their stories in front of the class.

Cultural Understanding

Increasingly, the classroom as a platform for facilitating cultural understanding has gained momentum in recent years, with a global movement for universities to produce graduates capable of communication in intercultural interactions (Meng, Zhu & Cao, 2018). This demand for cultural sensitivity prompts Byram and Wagner (2018) to strongly argue that promoting intercultural understanding must be a priority in a language classroom. However, introducing culture within a classroom can be challenging for educators. As a central component of language classrooms, teachers may rely on textbooks to highlight cultural elements. While coursebooks attempt to introduce culture, many have come in for criticism for misrepresenting a target culture. In his analysis of eight English coursebooks, Bao (2016) found 'a fair amount of stereotyped cultural content' based on nationality, gender, behaviour, and lifestyles (p. 4–5). For example, an image of an American enjoying a hamburger might imply that all Americans eat hamburgers and ignore the proportion of the population who are vegetarians. Bao (2016) attributes blame for the simplistic and inaccurate view of foreign cultures to the limited scope of textbooks and the biased views and finite knowledge of materials writers.

Literature and culture are deeply interrelated, and novels can build students' cultural capital. Most novels were not constructed with EFL learners in mind and can subsequently portray culture more authentically than coursebooks.

Lazar (1993) believes that literature can act as a catalyst for expanding student awareness of foreign cultures. In addition, novels provide an opportunity to build bridges between the cultural divide between the values and beliefs of a foreign culture and those of the students' own. For example, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* could introduce students to the issue of racism in the United States in the 1930s and present opportunities for learners to discuss that aspect of culture within their society.

However, similar to textbooks, learning culture through literature is also accompanied by caveats and Maley (2012) believes that teachers must exercise caution when using literature to introduce culture. Given its limited scope, a story can only highlight cultural snapshots or summaries of a particular society at a specific time. In a similar vein, Hall (2015) worries that cultural references within literature can create a misguided portrayal of a society among the readers. Referencing findings from admittedly limited empirical research into the degree of cultural understanding derived from the study of literature, Hall (2015) suggests that developing intercultural understanding can in extreme cases "confirm or even exacerbate pre-existing prejudices". For example, despite being set in the mid-twentieth century, the image conveyed by Frank McCourt's depiction of Ireland as a pious and poverty-stricken country in *Angela's Ashes* could misrepresent the reality of a modern, prosperous, multi-denominational and multicultural society in the mind of the reader. Thus, educators must recognize that novels have limited scope in 'teaching' a culture and should be utilized as 'building an awareness' of a culture. While acknowledging that a novel only offers a window into a culture, teachers can take countermeasures that prevent any cultural misrepresentations by attentively introducing cultural aspects of a novel and providing, where necessary, objectivity in their explanations.

Cultural Understanding *Through* Literature

Due to its complex nature, activities targeting cultural aspects of a novel are

Table 2

Cultural Aspects of Angela's Ashes

Ireland between 1930 – 1950	Ireland Today
1. Ireland - England relations	2. Ireland - England relations
3. The church's role in society	4. The church's role in society
5. Poverty	6. Poverty

challenging to introduce and require strategic planning from the teacher. Of principal concern when introducing culture is the avoidance of stereotyping and bias. Fortunately, *Literature as Appropriation's* principle of learning through literature facilitates a shared teacher-student responsibility. For example, students could independently research an aspect of foreign cultures such as beliefs, religion, or society that facilitates a richer understanding of the target culture. Students, either individually or in groups, could choose a cultural element from the novel that appeals to them. If deciding what to research is too demanding, the teacher can help identify cultural aspects from the story and provide guidance on potential areas (see Table 2). This scaffolding allows the teacher to ensure that multiple cultural elements of the story are examined. On completion of their research, students can present their findings either through a presentation or conversation with their classmates. Other students can be encouraged to ask questions of the researcher, and these explanations would enable the teacher to determine if a student's interpretation of a target culture is accurate or misconstrued and to provide necessary feedback to the class.

Personal Growth

In recent years, textbooks have included components that target developing learners' critical thinking skills and cognitive development. These can present as questions connected to the unit topic and are often located at the end of a unit. Despite this, Mishan and Timmis (2015) reference many studies that indicate

coursebooks currently on the market 'measure up poorly in terms of likelihood to engage learners cognitively' (p. 105). They observe that many target 'low order' cognitive skills that focus on comprehension and recall questions.

In contrast to information recall exercises, Tomlinson (2011) stresses that 'materials should maximize learning potential by encouraging intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement' (p. 21). Reader-friendly novels can provide an obvious way for students to stimulate their learning capacity. Through engagement with a literary text, students can develop a critical understanding of themselves and those around them (Carter and Long, 1991). Themes arising from texts can provoke learners to provide authentic responses through real communication with classmates. Gilroy and Parkinson (1996) agree that literature can act as a change agent by stimulating students' cognitive processes and developing their critical thinking abilities. Through novels, students encounter topics such as gender equality, racism and poverty that are universally valid and interesting to discuss. Rosenblatt (1978) points out the need to expand the narrow role of a text as communication between the book and the reader to view it as a stimulant for promoting communication between the readers as they exchange interpretations of its contents. Findings by Walsh (2021) indicated the cognitive development of a group of students as their opinions on various themes in *Pride and Prejudice* changed pre-and post-reading of the novel. Most cognitive processing occurs as students explore, negotiate and discuss themes within the narrative. The necessity for practical use of the language helps further mitigate concerns that literature inhibits CLT.

Personal Growth *Through* Literature

The personal growth model allows students to activate their cognitive ability and develop critical thinking skills as they negotiate themes within the novel. Students can be encouraged to critically analyze the various characters and situations in the story and identify any underlying reasons for their actions. For

example, a recurring theme of many narratives is good versus evil. *Wuthering Heights* casts Heathcliff as the villain; in *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt is the offender, and Charles Dickens introduces the audience to a litany of unsavoury characters in *Oliver Twist*. Many students may be prejudiced against these characters as their appearance on the page is accompanied by unpleasant episodes. However, *Literature as Appropriation* allows students to deepen their understanding of the character's idiosyncrasies by positioning them amongst the actors to engage with them and question their motives.

An activity conducive to character analysis is a mock trial for the story's villain. Ideally conducted on completion of a novel, this trial allocates each student a character role. The students, in their roles, are then questioned by lawyers on both sides. The advantage of this activity is that it encourages students to use English while consolidating the story as they comprehensively recall their character's role and the contents of the narrative. Students can be presented with the characters for this activity and asked to choose which part to perform. Alternatively, the teacher could allocate each member of the class a role of a character from within the story (see Table 3). As they are demanding parts, it is advisable that highly proficient and confident students are assigned as defence and prosecuting lawyers. In place of that, two students cold share the role of these important characters. A capable student or the teacher can perform the judge's part to facilitate the trial's opening and closing and prompt character participation.

Table 3
Members of a mock trial for Heathcliff from Wuthering Heights

Student 1 Student 2 Prosecutor	**Student 6** Young Catherine
Student 3 Student 4 Defence Lawyer	**Student 7** Hareton
Student 5 Heathcliff	**Student 8** Nelly Dean

Conclusion

While literature is gaining more attention in EFL classrooms in recent years, teacher hesitation and a lack of training in its application within a CLT pedagogy remain a barrier to its acceptance in the classroom. The perception that it is unsuitable for developing today's graduates' functional language and cognitive skills is challenging to dislodge. Therefore, resources must be directed towards raising awareness of literature's potential within a modern EFL context and comprehensive training provided to language practitioners. Then, educators could see that literature, especially a reader-friendly authentic novel, offers unique opportunities for language learning that may be difficult to achieve from a textbook alone. If modelled on 'learning through literature', a novel can facilitate many principles guiding CLT language classrooms. *Literature as Appropriation* provides an innovative blueprint for teachers looking to utilize a novel's role in meeting the demands of modern EFL classrooms. Used effectively with their students, novels can foster language development, cultural awareness and critical thinking skills required in a global society while adhering to a communicative development framework. However, more resources must be directed at comprehensive training programs that develop teachers' skills and confidence in effectively introducing novels within a CLT pedagogy. Only then can educators overcome their hesitations and insecurities as they begin experimenting with novels for themselves and assess their actual value.

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