Introduction

Ana Bela Almeida¹, Ulrike Bavendiek², and Rosalba Biasini³

A renewed interest in literature is gradually emerging in the foreign language curriculum as demonstrated in recent studies (e.g. Hall, 2015; Matos, 2012; Paran, 2010; Sell, 2005). The surge of research groups and new online tools on this topic, such as the Litinclass website (https://litinclass.wordpress.com/, Almeida, Puig, & Duarte, 2016) or the Literature in Language Learning and Teaching Research Network (https://lilltresearch.net/home/, Paran & Kirchhoff, 2019) testifies to the growing relevance of this pedagogical approach to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Both recent scholarship and class practice provide evidence that reading literary texts helps students to develop their language skills, as “[l]iterature exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language” (Lazar, 1993, p. 15). Moreover, “[a]t present, students who are extensive travellers demand a different approach to the cultural dimension” (Matos, 2012. p. 7); the study of literature in the language classroom provides these students with the intercultural skills that are increasingly necessary in the contemporary globalised world. As educators, we can employ the study of literature to prepare students for dealing with the complexity of a globalised world long after graduation.

But how can this approach be adopted in teaching and learning practice? What is the best way to use songs and poetry in the language classroom? How can creative writing workshops help language learners, and what are the ethical implications of bringing literature to the language class? These were just a few

¹. University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; a.almeida@liverpool.ac.uk
². University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; u.bavendiek@liverpool.ac.uk
³. University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; rosalba.biasini@liverpool.ac.uk

Introduction

of the questions addressed at the Literature in Language Learning Conference, which took place at the University of Liverpool on the 14th of June 2019, and attracted leading experts in the fields of English and Modern Foreign Languages learning and teaching through literature.

Two overriding themes emerged from the conference. First, the role of literature in the language classroom in a transnational world, where the majority of language students have a multilingual and multicultural background, and where their digitally mediated experiences and identities transcend the one-nation-one-language-one-culture idea of traditional language teaching. In this context, fictional literary texts can invite students to adopt different viewpoints and thus enhance intercultural awareness. The second theme, embedded and driven by the first, is the use of literary texts for creative appropriation, the way in which students can be encouraged to actively engage with, rather than consume, literary work.

In this publication, we are pleased to offer in the form of short papers a selection of the presentations delivered at the Literature in Language Learning Conference, which captures the intellectually stimulating atmosphere of the day.

Geoff Hall opened the conference, and some elements of his keynote speech are collected in the paper that we are happy to include in this volume. Hall discovers a new relevance of literature for language learning by positioning it clearly in today’s globalised world. Based on the changing profiles of language students, their often multilingual and multicultural backgrounds and their digitally mediated interconnectedness, he identifies new aims for language learning to meet the challenges of the evolving societies, arguing that literature is ideally suited to meet these challenges in the classroom. Connecting with and through literary texts, students develop ‘mediation’ and intercultural communication skills such as creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Using an example from an undergraduate English class in China, Hall explains

4. A brief account of the event can be found here: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-language-excellence/news/stories/title,1158700,en.html
that different perspectives, knowledge, experiences, and values are negotiated in response to a literary text.

While acknowledging the benefits of the use of literature for language learning, Idoya Puig, the second keynote speaker of the conference, provides an important reminder that the actual experience of literary texts in the classroom is not always entirely positive. Students and teachers often perceive literature as ‘difficult’, ‘time-consuming’, and ‘lacking in relevance’, and struggle with the compulsory study of literary works in their language classes. On the other hand, recent research quoted in her speech and paper clearly demonstrates the advantages of using literary texts for language learning, advantages that are reflected in the new curricula from primary to A-level education. Puig concludes that greater flexibility regarding the choice of text, as well as clear pedagogical strategies, are needed to foster a more positive attitude towards literature in the language class.

Moving into more practical spaces, a series of case studies illustrates the use of literature in classrooms today. Cecilia Piantanida takes the transnational approach further, using ‘migrant literature’ to teach intercultural skills in an Italian language class. Migrant literature offers both an inside and an outside view of the target culture, challenging the binary oppositions of foreign versus native culture, or first versus second language speaker. Through this approach, the students develop a critical awareness of cultural difference, as Piantanida demonstrates in her empirical study of a final year Italian language class, where she uses migrant literature both as a tool and a topic. By sharing the marginal relation to the target language with the migrant author, the learners are able to reflect on the notion of identity and the effects that using a second language can have on it.

Other contributions focus on the creative engagement with literary texts, which often includes elements of creative writing or rewriting. Experimenting with cento poetry – the composition of poetry from verses selected from existing poems – with students in a university English class, Amjad Alsyouf shows that the use of appealing teaching material that allows for creative expression
can counteract language anxiety. The resulting poems demonstrate deep understanding and creative use of the target language.

Imagination and creativity are also at the heart of three projects that Carmen Martín de León and Cristina García Hermoso developed to engage their students with literary texts in Spanish language. Immersing themselves in fictional worlds, learners are asked to write dialogues or continue stories, activities which allow them to use the language authentically yet creatively. In a questionnaire following these activities, the students confirmed that the tasks allowed them to build empathy and to develop their imagination.

Exploiting literature for creative purposes is shown to enhance motivation and to lead to deep appreciation of the language in class. Ana Reimão uses micro-contos, short and concise literary texts, to foster soft transferable skills. In her paper she recounts a Portuguese class in which clear and stimulating communicative purposes are created using micro-contos. As a consequence, her students engage affectively and cognitively in the learning process.

Salvatore Campisi uses songs to develop linguistic skills and to raise students’ cultural awareness in an advanced Italian class. Campisi carefully considers the advantages and disadvantages of using music for language learning and, based on his experience with a sequence of activities based on an Italian ‘ballad’, explains how the activity enhanced students’ engagement with Italian language and culture, helping them to develop both their linguistic and cultural competency.

Writers in residence schemes are a prestigious part of many university language departments. Such residences are often the highlight of the academic year for both students and staff. Reflecting on their experience of working with students of German before, during, and after an author’s residency, Anke Bohm and Hanna Magedera-Hofhansl develop guidelines to make best use of such a visit for student learning.

As highlighted also in Puig’s paper, in spite of their motivational potential, literary texts are often considered to be ‘difficult’ due to the ‘special’ language
used. As a consequence, the use of literary texts is not usually recommended in the beginners language classroom. However, in her paper, Géraldine Crahay discusses the use of simple, playful theatrical texts at French elementary level, arguing that drama is particularly suitable for such use due to its dual nature as a written and oral text. Crahay shows how a carefully designed range of short activities helps her beginner students access and ‘celebrate’ the text. A creative rewriting and performing of the students’ plays is the culmination of the activities and evidence of students’ developing linguistic skills, as well as their creativity, cooperation, and critical thinking.

With this volume and with the organisation of the Literature in Language Learning Conference, we have offered a contribution to the current debate around the use of literature in language learning, providing what we believe are effective and original ideas for both classroom practice and scholarly investigations. We hope that these reflections and proposals will inspire language learning and teaching practice as well as further research and discussions.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the University of Liverpool’s School of Histories, Languages, and Cultures (HLC) and the Centre for Teaching Excellence in Language Learning (CTELL) for their financial support towards the organisation of the conference and the publication of this volume.

We are very grateful to the HLC Marketing, Recruitment, and Events team for their practical and logistics help; the staff at the University of Liverpool Management School for their support on the conference day; Karine Fenix from Research-publishing.net for her priceless advice and patience; and our sponsor, European Schoolbooks, for organising a perfectly fitting display on the conference day.

We would also like to thank the speakers and delegates of the Literature in Language and Learning Conference for creating a stimulating and enriching day, and all the reviewers of this volume for their insightful work.
Introduction

We would finally like to express our gratitude to Professor Diana Cullel Teixidor, Head of the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLC) at the time of the conference for her time and words of encouragement, and to colleagues in MLC who gave us their advice and support. A special thanks goes to the Italian language assistants of the academic year 2018-19 for their help during the preparation as well as on the day.

References


