

Negotiating the Syllabus: Autonomy and the Teaching of Literature in French Lycées

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Abstract

Although multiple benefits of teaching literature in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom have been cited in contemporary academic discourse, including gaining cultural awareness, enhancing creative abilities and developing critical skills in a second language, there has been a dearth of empirical work on what resources teachers actually use in their courses. Studying the use of literature in secondary school classes provides valuable insights, as language courses at this level are part of the standard curriculum and secondary school students have typically become fluent enough to begin studying literary texts. In France, the role of literature teaching is in flux, currently existing both in the periphery of the general English course and leading the Literature in a Foreign Language course for students in the literary section of Baccalauréat preparation. Within these spaces, teachers must follow the national objectives for their courses, though they are able to make their own choices about what texts to bring into their classes and how to teach them. This paper shares part of a mixed-methods study on how literature is taught in French EFL lycée classes that included face-to-face interviews, textbook analyses, and a survey of more than 250 teachers. In the data, teachers raised concerns about teaching literature and described how they have overcome various challenges in order to expose their students to exciting authentic materials.

Keywords: EFL, Secondary schools, Teachers, Literature, Mixed-methods, France

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1. Introduction

The teaching of literature in the English as a Foreign Language classroom has been credited with the improvement of students' linguistic competence in multiple ways. Early on, De Huneus (1955) writes about creative problem solving, proposing that engagement with literature helps readers to see the differences between one culture and another and to consider ways of working through those differences. McKay (1982) expands on this idea and proposes that literature has the ability to teach tolerance as well as enhancing creativity through engagement with cultural differences and personal writing as well.

Pattison (1963) takes an altogether different position, claiming that literature provides similar contexts to those that students may encounter in real life. As he writes "reading and dramatizing and inventing stories is not only livelier than drill and pattern practice and exercises: it is more like the language in actual use" (p. 62). In his view, literature provides substance for further thought as well as the consideration of hypothetical situations where certain vocabulary could be used.

Contemporary discourse further emphasizes the linguistic and emotional benefits of teaching literature, as well as a potential return to De Huneus' (1955) original point about individual creativity. Al-Tamimi (2012) writes that teaching literature exposes students to different grammatical structures. Lazar (1994) promotes literature for the "intellectual, emotional and linguistic" skills it can help students to exercise through classroom activities and Sargsyan and Sivasubramaniam (2013) agree, stating that literature can be used to support students in expressing emotions and points of view in the classroom. Overall, it has a great deal of potential for aiding in student growth and language acquisition, but the teacher is responsible for providing a way to work with this material. While describing the benefits of literature is inspiring, finding out what considerations teachers take into account when using this material adds another layer of understanding to this matter.

This paper reports on interviews with secondary English teachers in France, who were enthusiastic about using literature while also being honest about the challenges they face in the classroom, highlighting national objectives, student abilities, and personal knowledge and interest in the content as some of their considerations. What develops is a nuanced view of this material, which is made that much more interesting by the fact that these teachers are able to exercise a great deal of autonomy in regards to the structure of their courses. First, the paper provides background information regarding ideas of teacher knowledge frameworks and autonomy. Then the current context of the EFL curriculum in secondary schools in France is explained, along with the framework for the study. Finally, data from the teachers is provided and analysed, and issues for future research are proposed.

2. Pedagogical content knowledge and teacher autonomy

In studying teachers' practices, researchers have become interested not only in what teachers actually do in the course of a classroom session, but of the mental formulations and sociocultural contexts that affect their practices (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite, 2001, Graden, 1996). Multiple names for the understandings teachers bring to formulating their classroom actions and activities exist, including personal knowledge constructs (Pajares, 1992), personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 1998), teacher perspectives, and teacher beliefs (Borg, 2003). The primary distinctions between these terms are their emphases on attitudes, classroom applications, and the ways in which teachers explain or justify their practice. These elements lead to a teacher's overall beliefs about her profession, subject matter, and students. For this paper, however, Shavelson and Stern's (1981) term pedagogical content knowledge is the most appropriate, as it continues to be used in relation to knowledge of teaching and knowledge of content (Abell, 2008), and provides the possibility of active negotiation of these two bodies of knowledge in making decisions regarding the material to present in the classroom and the activities to facilitate.

The negotiation of content, an awareness of teaching methods, and decisions made about what material to bring into the classroom as well as the structure of activities could be seen as an exercise of teacher autonomy. Benson (2008) asserts that a teacher's view of autonomy is "primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula" (pg. 15). His view of autonomy is further emboldened by the idea of emancipation from classroom and institutional constraints, echoed by Trebbi (2008), who sees the curriculum as part of the institutional constraints placed on teachers. In this paper, teacher autonomy refers to the independent decisions a teacher makes about her teaching, taking into account her knowledge of the subject, knowledge of teaching, a critical appraisal of student ability and an understanding of curricular objectives. Or, to use Trebbi's (2008) terminology, how a teacher navigates internal and external constraints to structure and deliver a course.

Smith and Erdoğan (2008) focus on three dimensions of decision-making: what a teacher does, her ability to take action, and her freedom from external control over her actions, while La Ganza (2008) proposes a model of 4 "dynamic interrelational spaces...all of which are connected socially and culturally, as part of the same society, and psychologically, through the common element of the teacher" (pg. 72).

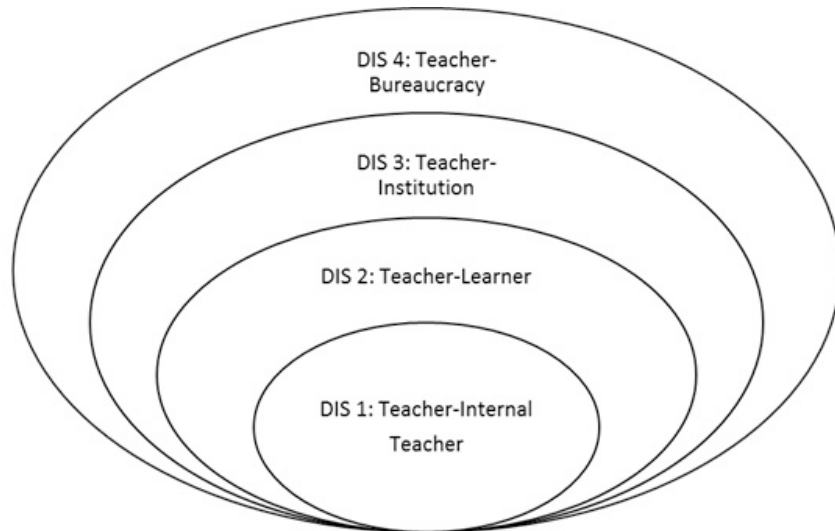


Figure 1. La Ganza's (2008, pg. 72) model of teacher autonomy

In La Ganza's model, autonomy is exercised in regards to the following elements:

1. The teacher's own attitudes and personal relationships
2. The way the teacher relates to students
3. The teacher's institution, which provides a frame in which she can do her work
4. The institutions and bureaucracies outside of the teacher's school, which provide guidelines of how her work should be done

La Ganza's model provides a useful way in which to view the dimensions of teacher's decision-making in general, but could be improved if it were brought down to the level of an individual course. In this study, which looks at secondary English teachers in France, the situation is similar to that of the one described in Linder (2000), where the Ministry of Education's curriculum specifies contents and skills objectives but does not prescribe the routes one must take nor the classroom organization or procedures one must follow to achieve the specified final objectives. Thus, in this case La Ganza's third and fourth dimensions can be consolidated into one larger dimension of curricular objectives. The following model provides a way to consider teacher autonomy regarding an individual course.

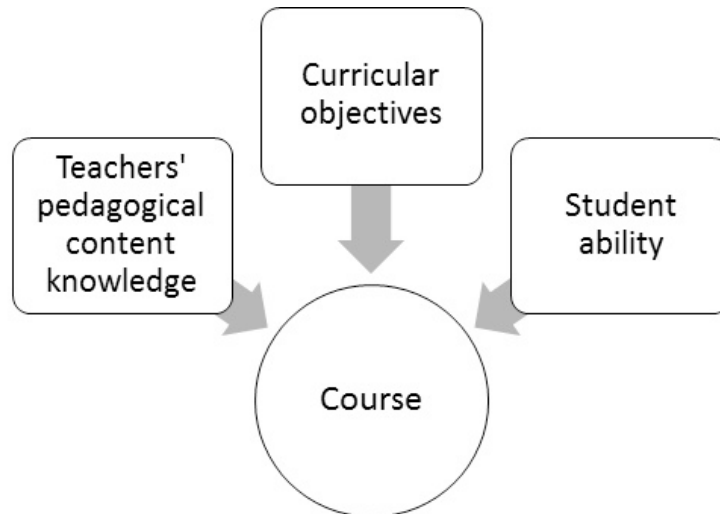


Figure 2. A model of the issues affecting a teacher's decision-making in regards to a particular course

In this model, the course is at the center, and it is affected by 3 dimensions:

1. The teacher's pedagogical content knowledge, defined as her knowledge of teaching methods as well as the material to be studied
2. Her perception of the ability of her students, which affects her choice of activity and materials
3. Curricular objectives, which provide goals for her to meet throughout the course

As with La Ganza's (2008) model, the teacher is the constant, and her continual negotiations of her own knowledge, her students' abilities, and institutional guidelines create a dynamic situation that actively influences the structure of the course. The course itself is not fixed, but instead constructed by the teacher.

3. The English curriculum in the French lycée

At this juncture, it would be helpful to understand recent changes to the English curriculum in French secondary schools. In April 2010, the French Ministry of Education published new goals for the teaching of foreign languages in *Seconde*, the first year of secondary school (MEN, 2010a). The intention was to have students working towards independent language use by the end of the second year of secondary school. Literature was referred to under the heading "Entry to Writing," where the Ministry articulated that gaining skills in writing should help students enjoy both reading and writing in a foreign language. Students should be encouraged to explore key themes in texts through class work and they should find, with the help of teachers, authentic materials to study in class (MEN, 2010a, p. 2). Multiple types of texts are recommended for study, including excerpts of key literary works, novellas, and newspaper articles. (MEN, 2010a, p. 3).

The document also includes a section on “Cultural Enrichment” (MEN, 2010a, p. 4). Art and literature are said to provide a special access to understanding society. It is asserted that studying authentic materials in all mediums as cultural products of a society will promote this understanding. According to the document, these materials should expose students to different schools of thought in the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, the document formally endorses the connection between language and culture and states that an understanding of language cannot be made outside of context. The materials used to support cultural enrichment should provide students with an understanding of the social and linguistic heterogeneity of the speakers of the given language. Gaining this understanding will help to teach tolerance and provide a greater awareness of current issues in the world (MEN, 2010a, pp. 4-5).

Another significant change to the secondary school curriculum was the addition of a course on the teaching of literature in foreign languages for students in the final two years of secondary school who have chosen to follow the Literature section of high school studies (MEN, 2010b). The course, entitled “Littérature étrangère en langue étrangère,” or LELE, began during the 2011-2012 school year. The language of the literature to be studied is not specified nor are specific texts prescribed for use. The goal of the course is to expose students to the main literary movements over the course of history through the study of multiple genres and types of texts including memoirs, legends, war novels, poetry and plays. Texts should cover the themes of identity; discovery of the other, love and friendship; avatars, heroes and anti-heroes; history and literature; voyage and exile, and imagination (MEN, 2013). The documents describe ambitious goals for developing student abilities in oral comprehension and writing through this course.

While the Ministry of Education documents propose using literature as a means to improve student abilities in comprehension, writing and cultural competence, it is essential to discover how teachers have chosen to use literature to further these aims.

4. The research aims

This study is a direct response to Paran (2006, 2008), who identifies a clear gap in empirical research on the use of literature in the classroom. Furthermore, the teaching of English in French lycées is an under-researched field. While Afanas'yeva (2012) looked at the state of Russian teaching in France with a country-wide study, no similar study has been undertaken for English prior to this one.

The research methods used follow the work of Gilroy (1995), Janssen and Rijlaarsdam (1996), Alvstad and Castro (2009), and Fjellestad (2011). Gilroy (1995) interviewed university-level English teachers in the UK about their use of literature. Janssen and Rijlaarsdam (1996) surveyed Dutch teachers in the Netherlands about their goals when using literature. Alvstad and Castro (2009) collected syllabi and comments from university-level Spanish teachers in Sweden about the role of literature in their courses, and Fjellestad (2011) looked at popular English textbooks published for the Norwegian market and analysed the amount and types of literature present.

Taking these studies into account, secondary school English teachers in and around three large cities in France were interviewed, online questionnaires were distributed to teachers throughout the country, and textbooks that were frequently mentioned in both of the interactive data forms were collected. In support of this plan, 2107 schools throughout France were contacted, encompassing all lycées which taught the general curriculum of Sciences, Economics and Literature. The resulting sample of 301 teachers represents staff throughout the country. This paper reports on interview data collected from 34 teachers.

5. Data and analysis

The interviews were intended to gather information about teachers' understanding of literature as well as their approaches and attitudes towards it. In order to do this, two approaches were taken. First, teachers were given a questionnaire to fill out and asked to think aloud while completing it, and then they were asked a series of 17 questions in a semi-structured format. The questionnaire requested information regarding the frequency of use of excerpts of novels, whole novels, plays, poetry, and short stories as well as general information regarding the teacher's opinions of these different types of literature and whether they were more difficult to teach than non-literary texts.

The intent of the interview questions was to find out the following information:

1. What are teachers' criteria for the choice of literary texts in their classes?
2. What do the teachers see as challenges when teaching literary texts?

Between March and June 2014, 34 teachers in and around 3 large cities in France were interviewed. The 34 interviewees were largely experienced urban teachers. Over two-thirds of the group had 12 or more years of experience. Twenty nine of them held advanced degrees, and 14 of them had passed the Agrégation exam, the most competitive teaching certification in France. A few of them had spent time in English-speaking countries. Ten had spent some time on an exchange program in university, and 10 had been French teaching assistants in English-speaking countries.

5.1 Criteria for the choice of text

The criteria that interviewees gave for their choice of literary texts can be grouped into 3 main categories: the syllabus, accessibility and personal taste. In their accounts, curricular objectives and student abilities together provide a concrete frame for their decisions regarding what texts to bring into the classroom, with personal taste providing an emotional dimension affecting their choices.

5.1.1 Syllabus: "It's got to be coherent"

17 interviewees mentioned the syllabus as a key factor in their choice of text. Some spoke about the national curriculum directly, as Liliane did when she explained "the guidelines from the Education Nationale are that you have to organize your lessons in sequences,

and each sequence has got a theme, basically. So the idea is just to pick up the right documents, the things that will concur with your theme, and which you'll be able to use properly in your class according to your students." Others spoke more broadly about this issue, referring to themes they studied or, as Mathilde said quite generally, "it's got to be coherent with the rest of what I'm doing."

5.1.2 Accessibility: "Not too easy...but not too difficult either"

Although the actual accessibility of the texts mentioned in the interviews could be debated, 16 of the interviewees mentioned striking a balance in some way between the level of difficulty and the length of the text while taking student ability into account. Nadine explained that the determination of a text's difficulty is nuanced by the fact that her class has a range of English abilities. She explained "not too easy, because the students will get bored. But not too difficult either—that means I would have to spend hours and hours on the same text, and that gets boring, too. Some of them are very good. Some of them have very real difficulties understanding English, reading in English, so I have to think of texts that suit, you know, students of different levels."

5.1.3 Personal taste: "It has to speak to me"

12 interviewees mentioned personal taste as one of their criteria. Georgette spoke directly about factoring in her personal taste to the constraints of the syllabus, saying "it's texts that I've loved and that I want to sort of want to transmit to them. There's not much sort of thinking about it, as long as I'm given one of those themes, I try to find...just texts I love." Annick and Veronique considered that their personal taste would affect the students' enjoyment of the text. Annick argued "it has to speak to me. I'm going to live with it for a while, so if I haven't found any redeeming quality in the text, I'm not going to live with it, and I can't expect the kids to want to" and Veronique asked "if I like it, why wouldn't they like it? So now, it will be my job to try to transmit this pleasure to them. Say "look at that. I read something very interesting, and I want you to read it, too. And I'm sure you'll enjoy it. You know, trust me."

5.2 Challenges of using literature

Although the teachers interviewed had a strongly positive attitude towards the use of literature in their courses, they pointed out multiple challenges that they take into consideration when using this material. The challenges raised were the fact that literature is a complex resource, concerns about student ability, recent changes to the syllabus caused by the 2011 educational reform, and the teachers' own confidence in their abilities. These are very similar issues to the criteria affecting their choice of material, thus showing the depth of these categories.

5.2.1 Content: "There's always something behind the words"

Almost two-thirds of the interviewees mentioned a concern with content; namely, that teaching literature was in some way more difficult than teaching other types of texts. The

majority of this group noted that what is distinctive about literature is that grasping the words and the storyline is not sufficient to get a concrete sense of what the text is about. Nadine proposed that “you want students to understand what’s behind the words. Because there’s always something behind the words, usually, if it’s a good text.” Yvonne articulated this issue more clearly when she said that “you know, when they just understand it, it’s very frustrating because it’s not the goal. The goal would be to—you know, to catch the beauty, the music, the poetry, the subjectivity. And they rarely do, you know? They get the message, the story...okay, ‘I know, I understood, I get the story.’ But no, there’s more to it than just the story.”

5.2.2 Students’ abilities: “They don’t make links”

The second greatest challenge, raised by half of the teachers, was the students’ lack of ability, whether due to a lack of vocabulary, critical thinking skills, or cultural knowledge. Leonie pointed out that “if they want to read books that are supposed to be for them—it’s too difficult for them, and if they want to read something in English which is at their level, the story is too simple for them.” Yvonne highlighted weak critical thinking abilities, saying that “they don’t make links, you know.” Manon felt similarly, noting that it “was difficult, you know, getting them to think.”

Estelle explained that a lack of cultural references caused students to miss out, stating that “sometimes they can just be lost and misunderstand a text because of a few cultural elements, historical elements that they haven’t heard of.” Noelle discussed the necessity of providing background information when teaching Pygmalion, explaining that “the students didn’t understand what happened that day at that time, so they had to go back and understand what happened to women and to--the political and social issues and the position and the situation of women at that time.”

5.2.3 Curricular objectives: “It’s a lot of pressure”

The third major challenge, mentioned in more than a quarter of the interviews, centered on the national curriculum and preparation for the examinations. Prior to the reform, teachers had more autonomy in choosing units for their classes, but with the most recent reform came the introduction of 4 themes to be covered over the course of the year in the general Première and Terminale classes and 6 themes to be covered over the two year LELE course. Ambre noted that “it’s a lot of pressure,” and Estelle argued that “the curriculum does not give us enough leeway to focus on poetry or literature and we do a little bit of everything.”

The LELE examination also came under scrutiny, with teachers feeling that the students were given an overly ambitious curriculum compared with what they were expected to present at the Baccalauréat. Faye noted that, with the examination, the nature of teaching literature has become more utilitarian. Every text taught in class becomes an opportunity for students to prepare their portfolios for the examination, and she said that “if you study an excerpt from a novel... You have to see what questions they’re going to raise about it; how they’re going to use it.” Constance combined the utilitarian realities of examination

preparation with the feelings of being limited by the syllabus in saying that “when you’re doing it for the exam, it restricts your possibilities because the students have to produce this and that and to be able to present it in front of the jury, so you really have to make sure they’re ready for the exam. And you have to restrict the things you would like to do yourself.”

5.2.4 Teachers’ abilities: “I wouldn’t know what to say”

A lack of confidence emerged in almost a quarter of the interviews. This lack of confidence often led to a teacher choosing not to use a particular type of literature, or avoiding discussions of style. Serge, who uses both novel excerpts and plays, felt at a loss with poetry. He said that “poetry--I cannot teach poetry. I just can’t. I don’t know if it’s because I never had a good teacher who taught poetry in school or at university...I wouldn’t know what to do or what to say.”

Cécile and Claire echoed Serge’s feeling that he had not been fully prepared to teach literature while in university. Cécile said that “it’s a lot of analysis, so it’s harder for me because I’m not a Literature major, so I’m not that used to studying poetry, and so it’s difficult for me to help students actually enjoy studying poetry.” Claire felt similarly about drama, admitting that “normally, I specialize in grammar and phonetics. So I love novels, but I’m not good at drama, and I don’t feel confident. Of course, I could try—find a play and just teach it, but I don’t think I know enough to do it.” Veronique’s lack of training led to her unease with discussions of style. She said that “I’m not really 100% confident about my knowledge about literature and how to analyze a text. But when I’m sure, yes, I talk about the style and some of the elements that characterize the style. That’s what I try to do, as much as I can. But when I’m not sure, I don’t talk about it.”

6. Conclusion

The use of literature in the secondary English classroom is dependent on teachers and the decisions they make regarding what materials to provide and how to teach them, while factoring in national guidelines and student ability. In French lycées, teachers have a great deal of autonomy and are allowed to bring in documents they find personally affecting as well as being able to structure activities as they see fit in order to build linguistic competence in reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The teachers interviewed felt strongly that literature was a valuable resource that added to their courses. They spoke about finding ways to make literature relevant to their units, using texts that provided a reasonable challenge, and choosing pieces that they personally enjoyed. At the same time, they admitted that literary texts are challenging for their students, the objectives from the Ministry of Education may limit what they are able to do, and their assessments of their own knowledge may also confine them. The data reveals that the choice of what material to use is bounded by these three elements, which provide reasons to use literature as well as obstacles to overcome.

Admittedly, this study is reliant on the teachers' own views and does not analyse the way the material is used in the classroom. Future studies could contrast the accounts of teachers with classroom observations. Additionally, work could be done to consider whether student autonomy is a goal of the English teacher in France and, if so, whether it has a direct or indirect relationship with the teachers' own feelings regarding the way they do their work.

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