

*Why not Literature: An Investigation into University Teachers' Perspectives of Teaching English through Literature in the EFL Classroom*

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**Abstract**

Though literature has been viewed as one of the best authentic materials in foreign language instruction since the late 1980s, and its linguistic, cultural, cognitive and aesthetic benefits have been confirmed and supported by a growing amount of research, it still plays a marginal role in many EFL/ESL textbooks, classrooms, and curricula, and is seldom included in TESOL/TEFL courses and programs. In Taiwan, for example, literature has been reserved only for the advanced literary courses for English majors and kept off the majority of university English courses for non-English majors. To explore the reasons, concerns, and problems that might hinder a university English teacher from using literature in the language classroom, the current study investigated these teachers' perceptions and experience of teaching English through literature by means of a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. The major findings show that language teachers' lack of confidence in handling literary texts as well as their perceptions of non-English-major students' needs for a more functional, practical kind of English led to their reluctance to use literature while literature teachers' feeling of uncertainty about how to turn a piece of literature into a good language lesson made them choose to rely heavily on ELT textbooks, most of which have very few literary texts, when they teach English to non-English majors; 2) literature teachers were more enthusiastic about learning how to use literature in ELT than language teachers. It is hoped that these findings will provide valuable insights into teacher development and training in this area.

Keywords: literature and language learning

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## Introduction

*Why* use literature in the language-learning classroom is a controversial question that remains in the forefront of discussion and debate today. Although literature, whether the classics or any other fictional, imaginative work written in English, has played a prominent role in the English curricula of many non-English-speaking countries over the past few decades, the questioning of the relationship between language and literature teaching has never come to an end. In the sixties and seventies, in fact, the emphasis in modern linguistics on the spoken more than on the written language led to a distrust of “what was seen as essentially a written, crystallized form,” which severely challenged the place of literature in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 2). It was a time, as Hill points out, when there was “a distinct reaction against the use of any literary English at all in the classroom” (1986, p. 7).

However, “keeping literature off the syllabus” has produced “a certain amount of unease as well,” so since the 1980s, the pendulum has swung the other way and the use of literature in language teaching has attracted a renewed interest among ESL/EFL teachers and researchers (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 2). Among the main reasons for using literature in ELT, motivation is perhaps “the most important justification for including literature on the syllabus” (Hill, 1986, p. 9). In the reading of an exciting or moving literary text, learners, stimulated by their curiosity, may have a strong desire to read on and on, more and more into the text, despite linguistic difficulties, in order to know what happens next, so if teachers can make a judicious choice of the text to read, literature can be used as “a vital support” to generate “greater interest, motivation and involvement” in the language classroom (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 4).

Another important reason for including literature in the ESL/EFL curriculum is that it provides valuable authentic material for developing skills and knowledge of the target language. As Lazar points out, since literature is not written for any specific purpose of teaching a language, it is one of the best authentic materials in foreign language instruction to supplement “the inevitably restricted input of the classroom” (1993, p. 17). For one thing, literary works present special challenges that demand readers put specific reading strategies into practice (e.g. the prediction or inference of meaning from the linguistic or situational context), which are also useful in their reading of other kinds of material (Hill, 1986). For another, in the reading of literature, learners can be exposed to language that is genuine, unmodified, and undistorted, and thus gain “additional familiarity” with different forms or conventions of the written mode (e.g., irony, argument, narration), which may help “broaden and enrich their own writing skills” (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 4). Moreover, the compressed or figurative quality of literary language can produce “unexpected density of meaning” or cast new light on common use of language, which may extend learners’ knowledge and awareness of the range of language itself (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 5).

In addition to the linguistic benefits, using literary texts in the language classroom can also help to “teach culture” (Brumfit, 1985, p. 120) and even provides “a wider educational function” in the classroom (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). On the one hand, although it is true that the world depicted in a literary work is a created one, yet literature still offers “the occasion for genuine exploration of the cultural assumptions

of the target culture” (Gajdusek, 1988). Thus, it can still be seen as a complement to other materials used to increase language learners’ insight into the country where that language is spoken (Collie & Slater, 1987). On the other hand, when asked to examine and respond personally to the values and attitudes in literary texts, learners get the chance to foster their cognitive and aesthetic maturation (Gregg & Pacheco, 1981) as well as develop their ability to make critical and mature judgments (Stern, 1991). Gradually, they will become more and more confident in their ability to sharpen and value their own response to the text and to “relate it to the values and traditions of their own society” (Lazar, 1993, p. 19).

Surprisingly, with so many good reasons for using literature in ELT, it stills plays a marginal role in many EFL/ESL textbooks, classrooms, and curricula, and is even seldom included in TESOL/TEFL courses and programs. In Taiwan, for example, literature has been reserved only for the advanced literary courses for English majors and kept off the majority of university English courses for non-English majors. As a result, students not majoring in English have long been deprived of the chance of learning English through literature and its potential linguistic, cultural, cognitive and aesthetic benefits confirmed and supported by a growing amount of research. This study investigated these university English teachers’ perceptions and experience of teaching English through literature by conducting a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews and then analyzing and comparing the qualitative and quantitative data to explore the reasons, concerns, and problems that might hinder these teachers from using literature in the language classroom and to examine whether any kind of special training is considered needed to help them exploit this resource confidently and effectively.

### **Research Method and Procedure**

The aim of this study was to investigate university English teachers’ perceptions and experience of using literature with non-English majors in the EFL classroom.

Three research questions were proposed:

1. What are the concerns and problems perceived to influence university English teachers’ decision to introduce literature into the language classroom?
2. How can literature be used in English language courses for non-English majors?
3. What can help university English teachers use literary texts with non-English majors effectively?

With the attempt to fully involve and explore university English teachers’ views and investigate these research questions thoroughly, a mixed methods approach for data collection and analysis was adopted in this study to allow qualitative and quantitative data to “support and inform each other” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 310). More specifically, a questionnaire survey was conducted to collect quantitative data, and semi-structured one-on-one interviews were employed for the collection of qualitative data, so that words can be used to “add meaning to numbers” and numbers used to “add precision to words” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 45).

20 Taiwanese teachers with the experience of teaching English language courses for non-English majors at different universities in Taiwan, including six part-time and

three full-time lecturers, two part-time and six full-time assistant professors, and three full-time associate professors, participated in this study. Eight of them were literature teachers with their first degree qualification in English literature while the rest were language teachers majoring in English language teaching, linguistics, or translation. They all filled in the questionnaire but only five of them indicated at the end of the questionnaire that they would like to be interviewed by the researcher.

The questionnaire survey included 25 questions divided into three sections: academic background, perceptions of using literature in ELT, and experience of using literature in ELT, while the interview was conducted by the researcher to investigate whether there were any other concerns or problems about the use of literature not mentioned in the questionnaire survey and to give the interviewee the chance to demonstrate how to use a literary text provided by the researcher in his or her teaching of a class of non-English majors. After the data had been collected by means of these two instruments, the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data began and was completed with the help of SurveyMonkey and NVivo.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Though it is expected that more Taiwanese university teachers may be recruited to take part in this study, the preliminary findings from the data collected from the twenty participants so far can still be summarized below to answer the three research questions.

Q1. What are the concerns and problems perceived to influence university English teachers' decision to introduce literature into the language classroom?

For language teachers, their lack of knowledge of and confidence in handling literary texts as well as their perceptions of non-English-major students' needs for a more functional, practical kind of English led to their reluctance to use literature in the language classroom. For literature teachers, their feeling of uncertainty about how to turn a piece of literature into a good language lesson made them choose to use ELT textbooks with non-English majors even though they were aware of the lack of literary texts in most of these books.

Q2. How can literature be used in English language courses for non-English majors?

Language teachers regarded literature as just another resource in ELT, so they would teach a literary text in the same way as they teach a non-literary one. Literature teachers would share background information related to the literary work as well as their literary knowledge of the genre with non-English majors in a way that had no significant difference from teaching English majors.

Q3. What can help university English teachers use literary texts with non-English majors effectively?

Both literature and language teachers agreed that some special training in the teaching of literature would be needed to make the use of literature with non-English majors more effective and successful, but it was obvious that literature teachers were more

enthusiastic about learning how to use literature in ELT from seminars and workshops than language teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the great potentials and benefits literature may offer to enrich second or foreign language learning, literature should not only be regarded as the ultimate aim of English instruction for English majors but should also become an integral and integrated component of the language curriculum for non-English majors. The role of the teacher in this 'enrichment,' as Hill argues, is an 'intricate' but crucial one (1986, p. 108). In the process of integrating literature and language learning, the teacher has to make a balance between them, so that the use of literature can 'serve the functions of teaching language' successfully (Aebersold & Field, 1997, p. 156), while the essential pleasure and special enjoyment in reading literature will not be 'lost in the more instrumental manipulation of a text for language learning' (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 8). Once the right balance is found and achieved, as Hill claims, students can thus gain both 'pleasure and profit,' 'wisdom and delight' from their study of literature, both inside and outside the language classroom (1986, p. 108).

It is hoped that there will be more Taiwanese university English teachers taking part in this study, and that the research results may help identify the concerns about and problems of present practices in using literature with non-English majors at Taiwanese universities and then provide EFL university teachers with useful resources and training needed to overcome their fears or difficulties, so that all university students, either English or non-English majors, can get the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from learning English through literature in the EFL classroom.

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