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## Repositioning Literary Texts in Language Teaching: The State of the Art

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# Repositioning Literary Texts in Language Teaching: The State of the Art

Donna Hurst TATSUKI

## 1. Introduction

For the past 25 years, the focus in English Language Teaching (ELT) throughout the world and in Japan particularly (Minami, 2007) has been on so-called “practical English”, which focuses on the functional use of language. This occurred despite the fact that there has been very little critical discussion or concrete rationale for the abandonment of literary texts/sources in English language programs apart from unsubstantiated claims regarding the problematicity of literature’s assumed structural complexity/non-conformity to standardized grammatical rules (Topping, 1968) and its supposedly incomprehensible cultural bounded-ness (McKay, 1982). Research has shown a divide between students and teachers; students desperately want to read literary texts but teachers cling to the outdated myth that literary texts are ‘impractical’ ‘too difficult’ and ‘culturally obscure’ (Tasneen, 1996).

Thankfully, this view is changing as more teachers and course developers realize how rich and valuable literary texts are as linguistic input and as “effective stimuli for students to express themselves in other languages and a potential source of learner motivation” (Teaching English, 2014, p.1). If even economists promote the value of literature and drama in their teaching (Watts, 2002), what on earth is the matter with language teachers?

Widdowson was one of the first linguists to advocate the use of literary texts for instruction in composition. His landmark *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature* (1972), encouraged teachers look critically at literary texts as models of expression which was followed by *Practical Stylistics* (1992). In the past 20 odd years, numerous other authors and researchers have advocated a return to the use of literary texts in ESL teaching (Lazar, 1993; Collie and Slater, 1987; 1994; Ur, 1996; Carter & Long, 1996; Carter, & McRae, 1996; Pison, 2000; Maley, 2001; Duff & Maley, 2007; Minami, 2007; Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan, 2011) based in part on the results of corpus linguistics research.

In Singapore and Malaysia and throughout Europe, literary texts have been

reintroduced into ELT programs (Tatsuki, 2013). In those places, orality, storytelling and drama have been recognized as important means of integrating literary texts into ELT curricula (Zenuk-Nishide, 2008). In order to ensure that we in Japan are not left behind in current international best practices it is imperative to learn from those programs, adapt their findings to the Japanese learning context and establish on-going networks among teacher/practitioners. In recent years, Japan-based educators have offered some useful publications to enable EFL teachers to include literary texts in language teaching contexts (e.g. Paran, 2006; Rosenkjar, 2006; Tatsuki & Zenuk-Nishide, 2012; Wright, 2000: 2011; Zenuk-Nishide & Tatsuki, 2012a; 2012b). However, researchers with backgrounds in literature and linguistics have rarely collaborated to seriously consider how literary texts may best be utilized in ELT.

This publication aims to rectify this serious gap, by presenting papers that offer current international best practices for the integration of literary texts into ELT curricula. Scholars in linguistics and literature as well as expert ELT educators in Europe and Asia convened an international conference/research session (The World Storytelling Conference: Repositioning Literary Texts into ELT, November 30-December 2, 2012, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Japan) to share expertise on theory and practice and to review the best practices of programs worldwide that integrate literary texts into ELT programs. The list of authors reflects this international perspective and their papers will offer insights gained through this unique and inspiring research conference.

Although there were a myriad of possibilities, this book has been organized to move from a general focus on the use of literary texts in language teaching to a more specific focus on the use of stories and storytelling in particular. In the following pages of this opening chapter I will attempt to show the connections and resonances among and across all the chapters in the volume.

## 2. Literary Texts in Language Teaching

It is important to properly define what constitutes a literary text that is appropriate to an ELT context. McRae (1991) made a distinction between ‘upper case L’ Literature (e.g. the classical canon including Shakespeare) and ‘lower case l’ literature (popular fiction, song lyrics, etc.) so as to provide a greater degree of freedom for the selection of texts to match the interests and needs of students. Others (Macmillan English Dictionary, 2003; Clandfield, n.d.) assert “literature is only literature if it is considered as art” (Clandfield, n.d., n.p.).

Personally, I believe it is better to err on the generous side and include as literary works “texts which (a) engage affectively, (b) challenge cognitively, (c) promote language awareness, and (d) help learners to reflect critically about and respond imaginatively to the world where they live.” (Lima, 2010). This means that virtually every piece of literature (regardless of definition) has the potential to be used and useful in an ELT context. What remains, then, is to think carefully about *how* to exploit such literature to the best advantage.

Chapters 2 to 5 each offer very different approaches (and sometimes combinations of approaches) to the use of literary texts in connection with language learning. Traditionally, literary texts have been used as source materials in translation oriented classes. In **The “Ripple Effect” of Literary Texts: Researching, Translating, Applying** by Marina Morbiducci, a range of research methods for use by teachers is considered, followed by suggestions for ways to incorporate the target language through the use of translation as a pedagogical tool. The chapter closes with specific applications of texts, thus coming full circle to create a “triple ripple effect” of three concentric circles symbolic of three levels (researching, translating, applying).

Even though there have been advocates calling for the renewed use of literary texts in language teaching, they have not really offered concrete descriptions of how to do so. In most cases, there have been statements of general principles to follow and a few interesting suggestions, but presented devoid of a clear context. This makes it difficult for another teacher to use and adapt to his or her own teaching situation. In chapter 3, **Communicative Methods for Using Literature in the EFL Classroom**, Bern Mulvey rectifies this problem. He provides a detailed description of the teaching context within which he is operating, including the expectations, misconceptions and shortcomings therein. Next, he offers concrete information regarding text selection, in terms of difficulty indices, subject matter and themes. This is followed by an explanation of the lesson in which reading is embedded in a pre- and post-reading activity sequence and then followed up by a discussion, which focuses on the reading passage as a work of literature in which the tools of literature (i.e. literary concepts such as simile/metaphor, point of view, etc.) help students have a satisfying discussion.

As mentioned earlier, among the objections to the use of literature in EFL was its purported grammatical complexity and cultural opacity. But what if such characteristics could be used for deeper learning? Behbood (2015) states:

Stylistics analysis will help students in comprehending how words and grammar function in literary texts. The knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical

concepts of a text enables students to develop their communicative competence and cultural awareness. Stylistics-based analysis of literary or non-literary texts in language and literature classes empowers students to perform better, with increased confidence and motivation. (p. 21)

However, stylistics is not the only means of approaching the text in order to develop communicative competence. An integrated four skills approach is a more intensive and effective way to get the most out of a literary text. This is the approach adopted by Lori Zenuk-Nishide in her chapter titled, **With Challenge and Support: Integrating Skills, Language and Content in a Literature Unit in EFL for Japanese Learners**. There, she describes in detail how a team of teachers collaborated to use Baum's (1900) novel, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" as a means to introduce both language and content in a high school English program. This collaboration was in response to the fact that MEXT authorized textbooks "are clearly not designed for CLT" (Zenuk-Nishide & Tatsuki, 2012b).

Using literary texts does certainly have to be restricted to novels, nor must it be restricted to literature written for mature readers; fables, legends and Nursery Rhymes all have their place in language classrooms. Indeed, it is wrong to assume that Nursery Rhymes are just for children at all—in fact they were not created originally for children. According to Sizer (n.d., n.p.) "Most of these songs were part of an oral-based society that relayed news, spread coded rumors about authority figures, and worked out its moral dilemmas (for kids and adults) in rhyme and song. And existing nonsense rhymes that were part of this oral tradition could be used or adapted to make references to current events." None-the-less they are a valuable part of childhood, not just for their entertainment and pleasure but for solid educational reasons too.

Research has shown that exposure to nursery rhymes helps develop phonological awareness, which is an important precursor to reading (Harper, 2011). Harper's research indicates that "children exposed to the intervention consisting of explicit Euro-American nursery rhyme instruction significantly outperformed the children in the control group on rhyme awareness and completion statement measures" (p. 65).

ESL/EFL learners of all ages can also benefit from exposure to nursery rhymes. Sayakhan and Bradley (2014) offer practical suggestions for everything from recitations and readers' theater to political histories and physical actions, along with a list of resources. Brown (2006) points out that adult learners may especially need exposure to children's stories, songs and nursery rhymes because otherwise they "may

feel separated from the mainstream because they have not learned about this part of the English speaking culture” (n.p.). Alba Graziano describes an innovative way for adult learners/teacher trainees to research and increase their knowledge and vocabulary in her chapter, **Three Men in a Boat: Jack, Guy and King Cole Teaching Language and Culture through Nursery Rhymes and Famous Proper Names**. The use of a moodle platform and the encouragement of the learners to seek information via the internet is both effective and appealing for mature learners.

### 3. Stories and Storytelling in Language Teaching

Without dispute, stories and storytelling are an important part of language teaching since they are so pervasive in every aspect of our lives (Tatsuki, 2009). Stories are not just entertainments (think, campfires and late nights); stories are fundamental to the way we communicate with others, build relationships, shape our identities, and assert our beliefs (Bell, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002). Storytelling skill has also long been admired and honed for use in business because it is a more powerful means of persuasion than cold charts, facts and figures (Denning, 2001). As Sacks so wisely noted, “Stories are ‘about’—have to do with—the people who are telling them and hearing them” (1992, p. 768).

In recent years, the centrality of storytelling in conversation has been confirmed by research within the field of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) and in narrative research in TESOL (Barkhuizen, 2011; Miller, 2011; Prior, 2011, 2014). Furthermore, according to Kasper and Prior (2014, p. 7) “Stories as responses to interviewer questions are prevalent in many types of interview-structured institutional talk, including employment interviews, medical consultations, psychotherapy, police interrogations, media interviews, oral proficiency interviews, and others (e.g., Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen, & Leudar, 2008; Prior, 2011, 2014; Roulston, 2013; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006)”. It is therefore particularly apt to dedicate chapters 6 to 10 in this volume to papers on stories, storytelling and other orally presented literatures.

Since storytelling is such a productive and necessary part of daily life, it is logical to use them for helping learners develop various competencies in language. In order to do so, however, learners might need assistance to understand the characteristics of story elements and other discourse features. Bowles (2010) summarized a multidimensional model for the interactional analysis of stories (see Table 1).

Table 1. Multidimensional model for interactional analysis of stories

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS		Micro-level
Analytical question	Analytical focus	
CA categories	How is the story organized at a micro-level?	Action sequences, turn-taking, sequence organization
DIMENSIONS	INTERACTIONAL ANALYSIS	
Interactional MODE	What is the level of affiliation and cooperation between participants?	Footing, frame, key, features and strategies of cooperation and politeness
Local interactional FUNCTION	What is the immediate interactional purpose of the story?	Local interactional context
Discourse ROLE	How does the story fit into the speech event?	Wider discourse context
PURPOSE	What is the speaker doing with the story? What features does it have in common with stories of a similar kind?	Communicative and social purpose Lexical, grammatical, discourse features
		Macro-level

(adapted from Bowles, 2010, p. 50)

This framework can be employed for analyzing and classifying stories that are embedded in conversations in order to understand their interactional properties. Like all aspects of talk, stories or narratives in conversation are organized; story organization involves “speakers signaling to other participants that they want to tell it, arranging the reported events in a hierarchy according the demands of the moment and bringing it to a satisfactory conclusion” (Bowles, 2010, p. 67).

In her chapter, **Oral Stories and Storytelling for Language Teaching**, Soe Marlar Lwin advocates the use of folktales as oral texts for use in EFL classes. After an analytical description of storytelling discourse and its multimodal features, she demonstrates ways to integrate storytelling into language teaching while exploiting its various verbal, vocal and visual features.

English is being introduced at earlier ages in EFL contexts in many parts of the world. Ghosn (2002) recommends “authentic children’s literature as an alternative to the traditional bottom-up approach to EFL, and offers four good reasons for using authentic literature in the primary school EFL class:

- First, authentic literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning, since children are naturally drawn to stories.
- Second, literature can contribute to language learning. It presents natural language, language at its finest, and can thus foster vocabulary development in context. As Collie and Slater (1987) have pointed out, it stimulates oral language and involves the child with the text; it also provides an excellent medium for a top-down approach to language teaching.
- Third, literature can promote academic literacy and thinking skills, and prepare children for the English-medium instruction.
- Fourth, literature can function as a change agent: good literature deals with some aspects of the human condition, and can thus contribute to the emotional development of the child, and foster positive interpersonal and intercultural attitudes.” (Ghosn, 2002, p. 173).

What many ELT professionals (including Ghosn) fail to do is consider the individual differences among the people, (children in particular), who will be encountering stories. In the chapter, **Telling Stories to Children: The Waldorf/Steiner Education Approach**, Brian Bresnihan takes on this challenge and tries to show how a Waldorf/Steiner elementary school teacher would tell a story to a class with consideration given to the various students’ temperaments. He describes how the teacher will adjust a story to the benefit of the different types of children based on their differences in temperament. He explains the ways teachers can address children with various temperaments at different points throughout the story telling, while turning from one group to another with continuous, seamless speech that holds the attention of all of the students.

### 3.1 Storytelling and Drama

The intersection of storytelling and drama makes literature both appealing and accessible to people of all ages. The word ‘play’ as it refers to activities mostly associated with children and the word ‘play’ as connected to theater come from the same root. Brown (2009) states,

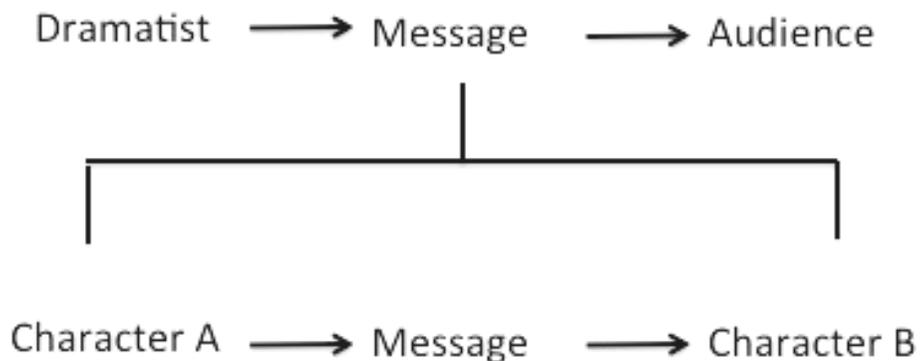
Neuroscientists, developmental biologists, social scientists, and researchers from every point of the scientific compass now know that play is a profound biological process. It has evolved over eons in many animal species to promote survival. It shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation. (p. 5)

As noted by Bowles (2010) the discourse of drama is “unusually complex because its oral and written forms are intertwined” (p. 8). He captures the relationships of the “mutually dependent” forms of speech in dramatic dialogue visually (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Forms of speech in dramatic dialogue (adapted from Bowles, 2010, p. 9)**

A second contributing factor in the complexity of dramatic dialogue is what Mick Short (1989) described as a split-level structure in which the characters interact with each other on one level while simultaneously the dramatist interacts with the audience/reader on another level (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Short's model of dramatic discourse (1989, p. 149)**

In the chapter, **Tell me a Story: Oral Interpretation in the English Classroom**, David Kluge shows how Oral Interpretation (OI) can be effectively used in language teaching. Although OI is similar to theatre, the players do not “ignore” the audience, as actors usually do; they tell a story to and for the audience. This paper first defines and describes OI, then gives its theoretical and pedagogic bases, next describes one institution’s use of OI, and finally goes through the process of teaching OI, ending with the performance.

The chapter, **Act it Out: From Drama to Literature** by Frances Shiobara incorporates drama activities, which encourage students to engage with the text more deeply in order to avoid the usual focus on translation and comprehension questions seen in ordinary literature classes. This concurs with Devlin (2013) who found that students were significantly more interested and more involved in the class when it included a drama activity as a supplement to their reading. In Shiobara’s class, students needed to reread and understand the text using their own efforts, which was both motivating and engaging. It could be argued further, echoing the ideas of Brown (2009) that dramatic play “is simply practice for skills needed in the future” (p. 31), which gives the players “the ability to perceive others’ emotional state, and to adopt an appropriate response” (p. 32), therefore “it creates an arena for social interaction and learning” (p. 49), and “it creates a low-risk format for finding and developing innate skills and talents” (p. 49).

The volume closes with **Storytelling and Literary Texts in ELT: Future Directions**, which as the title suggests takes a look at a couple of trends—digital storytelling and flash fiction.

#### 4. Conclusion

The use of literary texts in language teaching is enjoying a revival and that is evident by the increasing number of presentations, academic events and publications devoted to this enterprise in recent years. Professional organizations like JALT now have active Special Interest Groups (e.g. LiLT, SDD) that directly promote the rational and properly supported use of literary text in language teaching. It is my hope that teachers and researchers alike will seriously take to heart the ideas expressed in this collection of papers. Your students will thank you for it.

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