

POETRY IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: DEVELOPING LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE WITH LITERATURE FOR LITERATURE'S SAKE

POESIA EM UMA SALA DE AULA DE LÍNGUA: DESENVOLVENDO CONHECIMENTO LINGUÍSTICO COM O USO DA LITERATURA PELA LITERATURA

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Abstract: Language learning through literature dates to the teaching of classical languages, with the grammar-translation method. Years after the consensus on the limitations of this method, the use of literature in language classes is still very similar to that of those times. Today, studies such as those by Duff and Maley (1990) and Babae and Yahya (2014) point to a more conversational use of literature, emphasizing its various cognitive, cultural, and communicational aspects. The purpose of this research is to survey the theories that support this communicative use of literature in the classroom and, in the end, to analyze data on the experience of putting such views into practice. The results show that teachers can help learners improve their language skills by using the vast possibilities of literature while talking about existential, cultural, historical, and poetic themes of literary texts.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching. Literature. Poetry

Resumo: A aprendizagem de línguas através da literatura data desde o ensino das línguas clássicas, com o método da gramática e tradução. Mesmo anos depois do consenso sobre as limitações desse método, a literatura em sala de língua ainda é usada de forma muito semelhante à daqueles tempos. Hoje, estudos como o de Duff e Maley (1990) e Babae e Yahya (2014) apontam para um uso mais conversacional da literatura, ressaltando seus diversos aspectos cognitivos, culturais e comunicacionais. O propósito desta pesquisa é fazer, então, um levantamento sobre as teorias que defendem esse uso comunicativo da literatura em sala de aula e, por fim, fazer uma análise de dados sobre a experiência de colocar tais teorias em prática. Os resultados nos mostram que, com o uso das vastas possibilidades da literatura, os professores podem ajudar os aprendizes a melhorar suas habilidades linguísticas enquanto falam de questões existenciais, culturais, históricas e poéticas dos textos literários.

Palavra-chave: Ensino de língua estrangeira. Literatura. Poesia.

1 Introduction

Looking back at the history of language teaching, during the structuralism apogee, literature was not only primarily used, but also valued. However, late in the 20th century, literature was put aside, having its notorious comeback to language classrooms only two decades ago. Still, its approach remained relatively similar to the one used in the past century, which did not match the current pace of the teaching and learning process (BOBKINA; DOMINGUEZ, 2014).

The scars left by the grammar-translation method, inherited from the studies of classical languages, are still present in modern language lessons (FIGUEIREDO; OLIVEIRA, 2012; LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2000). This is noticed when a teacher uses literary material to focus on the meaning of certain words rather than bringing up discussions on the main ideas. That is also the case when the grammatical structure is analyzed rather than making room for a conversational activity so that critical thinking – hence fluency – can be developed. In other words, literature for literature's sake is not generally used in language classes, where the focus of analysis lies by and large on linguistic items instead of on the literary aspects of the text. This scenario leads to one question: why limit literature if there is a vast array that could be explored by the language teacher and even more extensive profit both teachers and students could benefit from?

Babae and Yahya (2014, p. 80) state that "there is not enough preparation in the field of literature for teaching in the language curriculum", and that is where the problem lies. Though the circumstance has improved, teachers are still roving from this challenging path to their comfort zone, trying – with no guidance – the possibilities of literature for literature's sake, but turning back to old methods because they are more accessible and already meticulously depicted, gradually, in guidebooks.

In this context, carrying out research on this field would be helpful to those who are eager to dive into the art of writing as a means to language learning through critical thinking. Thus, the following discussion brought up by this paper turns even more relevant. Rethinking the possibilities of literature in language classes will open doors to a more humanistic language learning process. According to Vasuhi (2011), that will surely make learning an exciting process for the students, a viable method for teachers, and a more plausible approach for the academicians.

2 Theoretical framework

Literary books are often used as a means to learn any foreign language. According to Babae and Yahya (2014), literature as a tool for language learning has become recurrent in the last two decades due to its benefits to the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Additionally, it expands the possibility of providing the student with some contact with the grammar and vocabulary of the target language. However, when literature is used in a language class, the focus is on reading and writing in translation activities. Literary works have been used as translations because those activities encompass pragmatic, syntactic, stylistic, and semantic knowledge (See BALBONI, 2017; GUZMAN; ALCÓN, 2009; PONTES; LOPES; BERENBLUM, 2020; PONTES; SOUSA; SILVA, 2015). Still, the benefits of literature in language class do not limit to those kinds of activities.

The uniqueness of the literary book as a tool for teaching and learning languages is well highlighted by Duff and Maley (1990). According to these authors, there are three reasons to use literary books for language learning. The first, as mentioned before, is related to the linguistic part. According to them, regarding language, "literary texts offer genuine samples of a very wide range of styles [...] and text-types at many levels of difficulty" (DUFF; MALEY, 1990, p. 6). This feature allows teachers to choose a book or text that fits their group, both in terms of the level of language development and students' interests. Though it requires a tactful and attentive teacher, it is worthwhile once students are more connected to the process, and the environment will be propitious to engagement and learning.

Furthermore, the second reason is related to the methodological value of literature. Duff and Maley (1990) argue that literature is, in its essence, open to multiple interpretations. Therefore, everyone who engages with this material will build their understanding of what they are reading, and this interpretation will rarely be identical to someone else's. Thus, "this [...] gap between one individual's interpretation and another's can be bridged by genuine interaction" (DUFF; MALEY, 1990, p. 6). The idea flirts with Swain's (2006) concept of *languaging*: trying to expose, contrast, and justify their interpretation, students will be triggered to converse and exchange opinion; being eager to make their point understood using the target language, they will push themselves to their limit and – maybe – go through it, as they test a linguistic hypothesis. In a summarized way, as stated by Lima (2020, p. 61), "the literary text [...], as didactic material, constitutes a rich tool in the feasibility of procedures, which the teacher can use to stimulate students' desire for reading and encourage communication".

Finally, the third reason is related to the motivation caused by the literary text. Recognizing that an author has been busy developing a work distinguishes a literary text from possible trivial texts found in other teaching materials. Also, according to Duff and Maley, "this 'genuine feel' of literary texts is a powerful motivator, especially when allied to the fact that literary texts so often touch on themes to which the learners can bring a personal response from their own experience" (DUFF; MALEY 1990, p. 6). In other words, bringing popular names to the classroom, such as Poe, Dickinson, Orwell, Conan Doyle, will allow teachers to open doors to cultural aspects of the language and boost students' interest in what is to be read. Texts from textbooks are, most of the time, shallow when it comes to artistic value, and that difference makes students more interested in reading something popular or known. Moreover, literature may raise memories, feelings, sensations, and thoughts unknown by their readers, and that is worth outputting in the target language (BOBKINA; DOMINGUEZ, 2014). Hence conversational skills will be developed.

In addition to these, besides expansion of linguistic awareness and development of personal involvement, Fernandes (2014) highlights other benefits, such as enrichment of cultural knowledge. Reading literary books allows students to know the culture behind the language and break the physical limit that distances them from where the language is spoken. It is not only a matter of learning about the differences between the mother tongue's culture and the target-language culture. Using literature in a language classroom is a way to teach about respecting those differences. McKay (1982, p. 531) argues that "literature may work to promote a greater tolerance for cultural differences for both the teacher and the student" once they can understand some features of the other's culture through artistic language.

Moreover, according to McKay (1982, p. 531), knowing about different *worlds within our own*, students "may increase their understanding of that culture and perhaps

spur their creation of imaginative works". Thus, another clear benefit of literature in a language class is the possibility of opening students' minds. This point is also supported by Frye (1964, p. 129) when he says that "it is clear that the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the students". Those students will open their minds to new horizons while they have contact with the target language.

Due to all the reasons previously mentioned, we understand the use of literary books as essential and enriching to the process of learning a foreign language. Still, literary texts in foreign language classrooms have played a controversial role: they have been both friends and foes of teachers and students. On the one hand, there are all the benefits previously mentioned. On the other, according to Babae and Yahya (2014, p. 80), "there is not enough preparation in the field of literature for teaching in the language curriculum". The lack of pedagogical material on the subject, for example, makes teachers who want to work with literary books in favour of language learning feel inhibited and insecure. How, therefore, can a student feel confident and motivated to perform a task once the role of language teachers is crucial in bringing success to language teaching environments?

In our viewpoint, it is likely that inhibited, and insecure teachers will move towards more straightforward and safer lesson plans. Once they do not feel confident enough to step into unknown grounds, the chances are high they will keep limiting their approach to literature to work with an isolated lexicon in less exciting and challenging books. Uninvolving books and activities, in this context, may reflect directly on the performance of the students, who might complain about the monotony of the process, be demotivated, and have an unpleasant experience with literary books in the language classroom. Williams and Williams (2011, p. 4) assert that "students discover their rewards by mastering new challenges". Thus, as students challenge themselves, teachers must meticulously choose books according to the level of the group and their interests. For effective use of the literary text in the classroom, a wise choice is needed, thinking of the needs and difficulties of the students, a book that suits the knowledge of the class and at the same time throws an achievable challenge to the students. The purpose is to overcome it and realize that they already have some knowledge of the target language.

Apart from the choice of the material to be used, there are other issues that this paper concerns that might impede the language learning process through literature's discussion. For instance, the interaction among environment, student and teacher is also of high importance in this context. Students will expose their reflections, opinion, inner thoughts, or personal feelings in a foreign language when talking about literature under this perspective. The teacher must watch this delicate situation closely, not to leave a disappointing memory on the student. One aspect to be concerned about, for example, is errors and correction. Learning a foreign language is challenging enough and exposing personal ideas is even more demanding. As a result, students may feel unease while speaking, and if correction is not balanced, the students may close themselves to the experience. Figueiredo (2015, p. 123) argues that "errors must not be seen as obstacles to students' success, but as a trampoline to reach proficiency on the target language¹". That is the way error will be seen and exposed to students during this research, so they understand that *noticing* and the teacher's observations will help them reach their objective: improve language knowledge.

¹ Our translation of: "os erros devem ser vistos não como obstáculo para o sucesso dos alunos, mas como um trampolim para chegar à proficiência na língua-alvo" (FIGUEIREDO, 2015, p. 123).

Finally, as for the approach to the literary book itself, the lesson will be planned and executed according to Healy's (2010) observations on using literature in language class. There are three main models when using literature in class to that author. The first is the *Cultural Model*. According to the author, "this model employs traditional approaches to teach literature by exposing students to the background of a text in order to examine the ideas and concepts behind it" (HEALY, 2010, p.179). This model provides students with opportunities to exchange knowledge about their cultural aspects, but this approach alone will not cover language development.

On the other hand, the second model is the *Language-Based Approach*, which covers only lexical elements of the text and resembles the studies of the classical languages, which were translation-based. Again, this approach is insufficient once it limits the possibilities of literature in language classrooms. The last one is the *Personal Growth Model*. Still, according to Healy (2010, p. 179), "this model attempts to combine both the above approaches and encourage more student interaction with the text". In other words, the third approach gathers the best of both worlds: through a communicative approach, students will be able to discuss the meaning, value and cultural aspects while trying to stand their points of view and improve their linguistic skills (HEALY, 2010).

This research aims to prove the feasibility of the *Personal Growth Model* while checking Duff and Maley's second reason to use literature in language class. Thus, students are provided with the opportunity to talk about literature for literature's sake, and the researcher observes how the gaps between their interpretation have been filled, how students overcome language limitations, how cultural differences are approached, and, finally, how students feel during and after this experience. The following section depicts the methodology used for four literature lessons in a language class.

3 Methodology

Six students from a conversation group of a language school in Jataí – GO, Brazil, took part in this case study (JOHNSON, 1992). Their age varied from 16 to 55 years, and they all have been studying English for at least six years. They all master the language well, but they share one complaint: they believe they are stuck to a certain level of English and that their language skills cannot be improved anymore. So, the proposal was to talk about poems, which would be challenging, given the language and the depth of the topics to be discussed. The students accepted it. Once they understood it, it could enlarge their language knowledge and fluency.

The lessons were taught by the first author of this article and happened online on *Zoom*, which allowed us to record all the moments of the class for further analysis. The classes were planned and executed based on the view of Healy (2010), as stated before. The activities were organized in a way students could have the chance to benefit from the discussion itself and the linguistic aspects (HARMER, 2001).

There were six selected poems of different nature: *Sonnet XVIII*, by Shakespeare ([1609] 1994), "Auguries of Innocence", by William Blake ([1863] 1978), "The Raven", by Edgar Allan Poe ([1845] 2012), "I'm Nobody", by Emily Dickinson ([1891] 2014), "The Road Not Taken", by Robert Frost ([1916] 2014), and an extract from *Push*, by Sapphire (1996). There are different levels of complexity both in the language and content of the poems. This was intentional, once one of the objectives of this research was to observe how students dealt with different levels of difficulty to express themselves. The material was organized according to how challenging they would be to

this specific group, going from freely showing their opinion on a four-line extract from Blake's poem to rewriting the late sixteenth-century Shakespearean sonnet to modern language.

Once the classes were through, students received an online questionnaire to answer according to their experiences. The questions, which will be discussed in the next section, involved many elements, from students' background when learning English through literary books to their emotions while reading deep poems about contemporary social issues. Additionally, some students were interviewed when their questionnaire answers were promising but lacked development. After all, the recorded classes were rewatched to check if students' answers matched their physical reactions (body language, facial expressions, and language usage) or if there was anything else to be noticed and highlighted.

All the six group students finished this process, though one missed one of the four lessons. They were free to choose pseudonyms to preserve their identities, and their answers will be analyzed in the following section.

4 Data analysis

The six students who took part in this research chose their pseudonyms: Madison Montgomery (15 years old), Daisy (16 years old), House (26 years old), Wendell (30 years old), Carrie (45 years old), and Herika (55 years old). Before starting the four classes about literature, students were questioned about their English background, focusing on literature to learn the language.

When asked about previous experiences with literary books in language lessons, the six students' scenario was very alike. All the six students mentioned that their former teachers mainly used literature as a source for vocabulary. Four students reported one activity, which consisted of a group reading the book in class, looking for words they did not know the meaning of to learn them together. Three students reported a very similar activity, but individually. Students were supposed to read the book at home and find ten words they did not know in each chapter. Only one student described one conversational activity, which they read the text aloud in class and stopped every time there was a cliffhanger, so everybody could try to guess what was going to happen.

Though the questionnaire focused on their experiences themselves, some students felt comfortable enough to criticize the way the literary book was used in their previous language classes. For example, Daisy complained about the way teachers evaluate students after reading a literary text. She said:

Daisy: First, I never liked the literary tests in English. I think reading a book shouldn't be graded. We read for pleasure. And it got to me when my teachers asked small insignificant details about the book. I never forgot an exam I took, and the teacher asked 'what color was Edmond's shirt on the picture of page 6?' I was so shocked to read that I couldn't help letting it show in my face. (Questionnaire)

This extract shows us how unhappy one student was because of the unfortunate approach the teacher had chosen. Still, questions of this nature are widespread when using literary texts in language class. That is because there is a belief that this kind of comprehension question will somehow prove if the student read the book or not. Still, this final destination – namely the exam – should not be as relevant as it usually is. We believe the journey is more important than the destination. In other words, students

should be evaluated – if they had to be – through the process itself. Reading should be one group activity to debate and construct knowledge, rather than a competition to prove who read and who did not.

When Daisy was asked about her expectations for the new experience with the literary book, she said:

Daisy: I expect to improve grammar and vocabulary. My teacher is very kind, but I also expect to feel bored. He's going to choose old texts I don't understand, and we'll cut pieces of sentences to see how grammar is used. First off, I don't understand why we are going to read here. Isn't it a conversation group? We could use songs, instead. The result would be the same and songs are more interesting. (Questionnaire)

Daisy kept memories of her previous experiences that closed her mind to literary books in language classes. As a result, her expectations were low, and she could not understand the full value of the literature of a particular place. That is because she was only used to having literature in language classes for language's sake.

Another student, Herika, partially shared Daisy's opinion, as we can see below:

Herika: I'm studying in a conversation classroom. So, in my initial opinion, texts were not expected as a fundamental material. But our teacher is so careful with the material he brings to the class, to be explored, that it's being a huge and rich experience to have access to very interesting literary material. (Questionnaire)

Herika is clear when she says she does not understand the presence of literary material in a conversation group. It indicates that she has never experienced an everyday activity through literature. Thus, it shows the necessity of highlighting the power of literature and its vast possibilities for language and communication before getting into the material itself. That was one of the teacher's notes before starting his lesson planning.

4.1 Lesson 1

The course those students attend, *Conversation*, happens twice a week, and it aims at stimulating the students to talk about topics proposed by the teacher. First, the teacher introduces new vocabulary that would help them with the conversation, and later the discussion is opened again so that the students can practice what they have just learned. The four lessons on poetry also followed this structure. The first meeting started with two simple questions: What is poetry? Do you like it? This discussion accounted for half of the first class because students had different opinions on poetry, which led to a spontaneous activity to understand what differentiates Pietro Aretino's and Cardi B's rap lyrics.

Once this warm conversation ended, students were presented to the poems they would read the following classes. As soon as they were familiar with their names and background, students were asked to read four lines of Blake's poem, *Auguries of Innocence*, and expose their interpretation. Before doing it, the group was split into three breakout rooms (which are separate online rooms where fewer people can be assigned to have private conversations) to expose their interpretation to one of their

colleagues. After five minutes of private chat, they were called back to the main room, where they shared their answers with the whole class. This conversation lasted until the end of this first meeting.

When students had access to the questionnaire, they were asked how they felt during this first interpretative and conversational activity. Wendell, for example, highlighted how important it was to start talking about his interpretation of Blake's poem to only one colleague at first. He wrote:

Wendell: I felt afraid of being wrong. I know there is no wrong interpretation. There's no such a thing. The teacher told us that at the beginning of the class. But I was afraid to sound dumb. When I talked to House², he made me feel like I wasn't so wrong, so I felt more comfortable talking to the whole group later. (Questionnaire)

Wendell's observation matches Harmer's theory (2001) when he argues that "whole-class teaching is less effective if we want to encourage individual contributions and discussion since speaking out in front of a whole class is often more demanding – and therefore more inhibiting – than speaking in smaller groups" (HARMER, 2001, p. 43). In other words, it is vital that, at the first moment, students gain confidence before putting their ideas out to the whole class. This is a natural – but sometimes neglected – procedure to boost confidence, hence fluency.

Carrie agrees with Wendell and adds that she also liked working in a small group first:

Carrie: I liked that we started with a short extract from Blake because we could feel confident. I felt glad I understood those four lines. Then I thought to myself, "let Poe come; I'm ready". And when we talked about the poem, I loved that I could rehearse with Hekira first. She helped me with some words I didn't remember." (Questionnaire)

Following the same line of thought, Carrie was glad she could "rehearse" before talking to the whole group. Her comment shows us two critical features of this first activity: First, the collaborative aspect, and how one student can help the other with missing words they need to express themselves (FIGUEIREDO, 2018, 2019). She also added that the progressive aspect of this lesson helped her feel more confident. The scenario would have been very different if students were forced to read a 180-line poem (like *The Raven* by Poe) with more complex language by the beginning of the experience. Such happens because they would be scared of starting with a more challenging text than they were prepared to, and the linguistic barrier, which could raise the language level to a point students would not be able to help each other. So, one conclusion can already be highlighted: peer activities and the progressive character of the activities and material may reflect directly in the students' experience.

4.2 Lesson 2

The second lesson started with one question: "Who are you?"

The teacher said, before doing anything, that he wanted students to answer a very simple but essential question. Then he showed this question on the screen. Students

² The original name was changed here to protect House's real identity.

were silent for a moment, and the teacher said he would give them three minutes to think about that. They were asked to turn off their cameras and use those minutes to build a sentence to answer that question.

The answers varied from "I'm the best person in the world for me" (Herika) to "I'm an experiment from myself to the world" (Madison). Students struggled to reflect on that question, as we can see in the following excerpt:

House: I will never forget the time you asked me who I am. I never question that to myself, and I feel like this is one of the questions we should bring to our minds every now and then. I left the class that day mesmerized. Thank you. (Questionnaire)

This comment is an example of how the discussion about literature – even before reading it – can open students' minds to new ideas and possibilities, of how making room to debate in language class may be profitable not only for language but also for self-development. As Harmer (2010, p. 99) states, "good reading texts can introduce interesting topics, stimulate discussion, excite imaginative responses and provide the springboard for well-rounded, fascinating lessons".

Once this first discussion was done, the teacher introduced the poem "I'm Nobody", by Emily Dickinson, which can be read as a response to that very question "who are you?". At this point, students were encouraged to imagine who she was talking to and what other questions she could be trying to answer. The conversation led to a dozen different possibilities, and all students agreed to disagree with each other.

The discussion ended, and one of the students, Carrie, asked the meaning of the poem's last word, *bog*. The teacher first encouraged them to try guessing the meaning by the context. They all tried, but they failed. Then, he shared his screen and showed the pictures that appeared when googling *bog*. After students saw the pictures, they tried to create meaning using the poem's context. Finally, after a few attempts, they achieved the correct meaning of the word. That is one example of how vocabulary can be improved through discussion. The answer was not given but built in the group with the teacher's assistance. This collaborative work (FIGUEIREDO, 2018, 2019; VYGOTSKY, 1998) shows students that they are independent to understand language and can help each other.

Wendell commented on his questionnaire, saying how literary reading texts can help him improve his vocabulary.

Wendel: It is impressive how literature has the power to produce a picture that sticks to our brains. I will never forget the meaning of bog, for example. I will forever connect it to frogs. (Questionnaire)

As for the power of literature to provide students with new vocabulary, Pound (1970, p. 35) says, "literature is a language full of meaning". This fullness of meaning may help students create mental pictures of words and connect them to emotions to help them memorize vocabulary more efficiently. Rather than only have contact with the terms for some time and put them in empty gaps in random sentences, students will be connected to the new vocabulary through art and emotion. This feature of literature is rarely found somewhere else.

The teacher introduced the following text with an extract of Sapphire's movie *Precious*, based on the book *Push*. In the dramatic scene, the main character tries to define who she is as if she was answering the same question students had responded to

before: *who are you?* Once they watched this scene and the teacher led the conversation to the context of the book – racist Brooklyn in the late eighties –, he introduced a poem written by the protagonist. The poem is an attempt to expose Precious's pain in words, though she was illiterate, through the first thing she learned at school, the alphabet. She writes one word that represents her life to each letter of the alphabet. As she was still learning to write and read, some words were misspelt or incomplete³. The task, then, brought to students was to read the poem and, through the context, try to discover what words she meant to use.

This detective task took students some time. First, the teacher let them talk and negotiate the meaning of words like "w bk" (we are black) and "lv" (love). Next, students finished their "translation" of the poem, from the language the person used to the standard American English, then the teacher showed them what the author meant by using the notes from the book itself. After that, a deeper conversation began, trying to understand why she used words like "nfkkk" (North America = KKK) and "I sumb" (I am somebody). This task raised relevant topics to the conversation, such as racism and the need for marginalized communities to be seen and heard. Undoubtedly, the most serious and emotional moment of the whole process.

Wendell reported that he was surprised with the lesson's topic and his speaking skills. He said:

Wendel: I never talked about such a heavy topic in English. I thought I wouldn't be able to, but I could. [...] I didn't believe it when I got emotional reading the poem and talking about it. I think it means I'm fluent because I felt the language. (Questionnaire)

This excerpt of Wendell's answer illustrates the self-awareness raised by the conversation. He noticed he was able to talk about complex topics, and this fact made him feel self-confident. In agreement with that, Herika said:

Herika: I felt growing up... I loved hearing so genuine perceptions and understanding them. I opened my mind. I respected different opinions and learned about our cosmopolitan position. I felt empathy. Anywhere we are... We are part of a WHOLE." (Interview)

She was especially mesmerized by how deep the comments on the poem were. She said she could relate to Precious, the book's character, and she felt empathetic. She also highlighted the joy she felt when understanding "genuine perceptions". There has been, in other words, self-awareness, too.

To finish this class, the teacher assigned one piece of homework. Students should read "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. The directions were simple: they should read the poem without any help and let their interpretation free, even if they did not understand the whole. Therefore, they did it.

4.3 Lesson 3

Between the second lesson and the third, there would be a weekend. The teacher did not want the students to stay four days without contact with the language and poetry, so students were assigned to read Frost's "The Road Not Taken" at home. This

³ This is an extract from the poem: A is fr Afric / B is for u bae / C is cl w bk / D is dog / E is el Vm [...]

poem does not make use of a complex lexicon or grammatical structure. That is the reason why the teacher chose it to be their homework. Thus, students could read a poem alone and quickly build their interpretation of the text, highlighting the individual aspect of reading.

The third meeting started with a picture on the screen. There was a road forking in two opposite ways. Under this picture, students could read the extract from the poem: "two roads diverged in a yellow woods and sorry I could not travel both". Next, the teacher asked students to describe what they felt and understood when they read the poem at home. The answers varied from "it's a person who has a crucial decision to make, which he/she can't take back later" (Herika) and "it's someone who doesn't know what he/she wants" (Daisy). Finally, after supporting their ideas by using parts of the poem, most of the group accepted that the poem was about "life choices". Though the objective was not to convince each other, they advocated for their opinion, and the group somehow built their understanding of the text. Still, this proves Duff and Maley's (1990) theory that genuine conversation bridges different readings.

After rereading the poem – now together –, the teacher asked students to think of one moment of their lives that they had to make a difficult decision. They thought about it for a while, and the teacher asked students to share their memories if they were comfortable enough to do it. The first one was Herika. She is the oldest in the group, and she shared some personal life moments. After her, Carrie, another adult, also shared some of her thoughts, and she ended her speech by paralleling life choices to keep studying English even though people said she was too old for it.

During an interview about this experience, Herika said:

Herika: The poem got to me. I felt like my heart was open to sharing some personal things with friends. It was like therapy, I would say. Suddenly I felt like saying all those things I said. Poetry has had a substantial impact on me. (Interview)

This answer shows us how literature helps build a welcoming environment, as Lima (2020) asserted. The emotions evoked by the reading opened doors to a natural conversation in which the student could express her feelings.

Once the students had finished their conversations, the teacher showed them a picture of Poe on the screen. Next, the teacher introduced the author, telling them how sad his life had been. Then, together, students and teacher read a short biography about the author in which the teacher highlighted the tough life choices Poe had taken. Those would include traveling even though his doctor had warned him not to – which may have caused his death, the addiction to alcohol, the way to manage relationship issues. There was, then, a long conversation about how different the world of literature would have been if he had made other choices.

Thus, the teacher introduced Poe's movement: The Gothic. Trying to elicit what they knew about the topic, the conversation focused on what the word "gothic" brought to students' minds. Then, the teacher helped them understand the literary movement, and he explained what Poe's role was in it. Next, the group talked about its features, the period's popularity in Europe and America, how it had its rise and fall due to the Civil War, and finally got to one of the most iconic of its poems: "The Raven".

The teacher displayed the poem on the screen and told students they were supposed to work together to understand the lines alone. So, the teacher silently observed the group having their first contact with the text. Slowly, one helping the other, students started simplifying the words so everybody could understand the poem's

meaning. The term "dreary" turned into "dull"; "pondered", turned into "thought about"; grammatical inversions were undone. In a matter of ten minutes, students had simplified the text to a level everybody could understand the general meaning. Though this article argues against focusing only on understanding words from a text, this activity was used to get to the objective of this lesson.

The objective was to identify traces of the Gothic movement in the text. Students were surprised at first, but soon they started pointing out the dark medieval setting, the male insane character, the idealized female character, the physical and mental torture. As the teacher let the conversation go, Madison, one of the students, pointed out poetic devices, such as metaphor and similes. When the teacher noticed students were running out of comments on the text, he interfered and commented on their answers and added what students had missed.

Madison, when answering the questionnaire, wrote:

Madison: I felt terrific in that class. I could show my classmates I knew something about poetry. I had studied metaphors at school, and I just tried to apply them there. I felt good. (Questionnaire)

This answer shows us how students feel eager to talk if they have something to add to the conversation. That highlights the fact that teachers should bring various topics to class, so all individuals have the chance to feel like they could add to the group. In this case, school content triggered Madison to engage in the conversation. Not only he could notice that, but he also refrained he "felt good" about it.

To end this class lightly, the teacher watched with the students a short episode of *The Simpsons*, in which they parody *The Raven*. Students commented on the similarities between the poem and the T.V. show, and this intersemiotic conversation closed the third meeting.

4.4 Lesson 4

The fourth and last class started with the picture of Shakespeare on the screen. Students joined the online room and started talking about the author, saying they thought it would be the most difficult. As soon as all the students were settled, the teacher elicited what they knew about Shakespeare. Some mentioned his words, some talked about his mysterious life, some pointed out that maybe he did not even exist. Then, the teacher invited students to play a guessing game named *Shakespeare's numbers*. Everybody should guess a number to answer the questions from the quiz – such as the year he was born, the year he died, how many sonnets he wrote. The student who guessed closest to the answer would score.

The teacher contextualized Shakespeare's period and talked about his plays and sonnets using these numbers. First, the teacher highlighted the early modern English language he used and asked if students knew some examples of changes English had been through. Then, he briefly exposed the pronoun "thou" and the conjugation of the verbs. The teacher also showed examples of uses that remain in the modern world, such as books and historical buildings, the Bible, and the entrance of the University of Texas, for example. To finish this discussion, the teacher showed some quotes by Shakespeare that are famous for exemplifying the use of "thou", for instance, "thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel", from *Romeo and Juliet*, and "nature, thou art my goddess", from *King Lear*.

During the interview, House commented:



House: This lesson showed itself important right from the beginning. The teacher contextualized the author, and we could notice how important he was to the English language. It was also very interesting to understand how the language changed. I kept thinking that language is always evolving, and we should never stop studying 'cause there will always be something new. (Interview)

Although some teachers would consider unnecessary teaching archaic language, through this approach, students were highly interested in how language transformed. It even helped them understand why there are two *yous* among the subject pronouns. Also, House felt like the approach solemnized the content, which makes students feel empowered after they are able to understand what is, known by common sense, difficult reading. Choosing to explain "thou" would level the text down, once the writing feature that causes strangeness the most is the Early Modern English singular second person.

After contextualizing and exposing some lines written by Shakespeare, the teacher introduced Sonnet XVIII. He displayed it on the screen, and he asked students to read in pairs and try to understand. In the breakout rooms, students discussed and, again, negotiated the meaning of the sonnet. The teacher called them all back to the main room, and they probably were all expecting to be challenged to explain the poem seriously. However, the activity was a little different.

When students returned to the main room, a picture of Shakespeare wearing modern clothes, headphones, and a cap welcomed them – students laughed instantaneously. Next, the teacher challenged students to rewrite the romantic sonnet in contemporary language, as if it was a 2021-rap song. Immediately, students engaged in the activity. Fastly, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" turned into "Can I call ya summer chick?". Students used their linguistic knowledge to bring an ancient text to their contemporary language.

About this activity, Madison said:

Madison: It was the best class ever! It was so much fun to feel free to give this twist to Shakespeare's text. I mean, we talk about his works in such a solemn way that we don't even think it would be allowed to do that! It was really fun! A real twist." (Questionnaire)

This last activity lowered the anxiety level of the students, who felt free to show they could translate the text into this modern language and style. Young (1991) says that "one of the current challenges in second and foreign language teaching is to provide students with a learner-centered, low-anxiety classroom environment" (YOUNG, 1991, p. 426). Agreeing to that, this research points that bringing language to students' context is one of the ways to center the learning process on the student and build a welcoming environment that will lower anxiety.

This last class ended with students singing the new version of Sonnet XVIII as a hip-hop song, using the instrumentals to The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air theme. Daisy said:

Daisy: I will never ever forget these lessons. Especially when I felt good enough to sing, even though I don't know how to sing. Thank you, teacher. (Questionnaire)

Some final remarks

This research attempted to explain and exemplify how talking about literature in language classes can be profitable for linguistic knowledge, even though the language was not the focus in the process. Regarding the benefits, one could highlight the building of a low-anxiety and welcoming environment (YOUNG, 1991), encouraging students' autonomy and peer-learning, knowing about different cultures and respecting them, and, finally, improving linguistic and conversational skills once they had contact with the genuine language.

That is also a reminder to teachers that they do not have to attach themselves to the translation-base of lexicon-focused activities once literature provides us with multiple possibilities in class. Nonetheless, we agree with Babae and Yahya (2014, p. 80) when they argue that "there is not enough preparation in the field of literature for teaching in the language curriculum". However, this research functions as a first step to move from the grammatical approach of literature to a more conversational one. Furthermore, it brought to the public the lesson plan and theories that supported it to assist other teachers eager to work with literature in language class. So, we conclude that, by using the vast possibilities of literature, teachers can help learners improve their language skills while talking about existential, cultural, historical, and poetic themes of literary texts.

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