2 Literature in language learning in the UK context: from current A-levels to university

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at the impact of recent reforms to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced Subsidiary (AS) curriculum in the UK, which included the teaching of literature in the language classroom in an attempt to make the study of languages more attractive and to better prepare students for university. The delivery of the new GCSEs and A-Levels has served to highlight new challenges, which are hampering the intended purpose of the reforms: language GCSEs and A-Levels are perceived as more difficult than other subjects and severe grading has been confirmed. Moreover, most teachers do not view the compulsory literature element positively. Conversely, academic studies confirm the value of literature in the study of languages and various initiatives demonstrate the attractiveness and effectiveness of literature in terms of increasing motivation and enhancing language skills. In this paper, we suggest some final proposals to improve this situation.

Keywords: literature, language learning, language GCSE, A-level.

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1.   Introduction and current challenges in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teaching

One of the latest reports by the Higher Education Policy Institute (Bowler, 2020) discusses whether the study of languages in the UK has reached a crisis point. The British Academy has also produced a number of reports, while language associations are working to measure the extent of the problem and are moving forward on influencing policy in order to reverse this decline.

> "The UK is currently nowhere near to fulfilling its linguistic potential. […] There has been a drastic and continuing decline in the numbers studying languages at secondary school and consequently at university, especially over the past two decades. There is no indication that the Government's aim for 90% of pupils in England to take a language (modern or ancient) at GCSE by 2025 will come even close to being achieved" (British Academy, 2019, p. 5).

One of the main changes introduced in the latest education reform to improve the uptake of foreign languages was to make the study of a language compulsory in primary education. Paradoxically, this requirement was introduced at the same time as the compulsory component of languages in secondary education was removed. Thus, while taking a step forward in initiating young learners in foreign languages, the need and incentive to continue into secondary school disappeared, with highly damaging consequences (Bowler, 2020).

According to the Department of Education (DfE), the purpose and reason for studying a language at Key Stages 2 and 3 was that "learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures" (DfE, 2013, n.p.). A list of abilities published included the capacity to "appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language" (DfE, 2013, n.p.). The value of literature in the new curriculum is therefore clearly stated. However, the reality at primary school level is that, while there has been a general improvement, there is ample room for more given that language learning remains a low priority (Tinsley & Board, 2015a).

Consequently, the uptake of languages at GCSE level has not improved, and secondary education has been unable to capitalise on the introduction of the study of a language at primary level. Moreover, DfE set a specification with descriptors limited to the performance of a 'top' student, moved the 60% controlled assessment in writing and speaking to 'all at the final exam', and imposed target language instructions, thus introducing an additional demand. There is a widespread perception, therefore, that languages are difficult, and this acts as a deterrent to those considering studying a language to A-Level. It has also now been fully recognised that there is severe grading in GCSE MFL and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation in England (Ofqual) is committed to reviewing the situation (Bowden, 2019).

The British Council identifies several other reasons why students opt not to continue with the study of languages to A-Level: students need top A-Level grades for their university applications; languages are losing out in the competition with other STEM subjects perceived as being more useful; some young people are being dissuaded from studying languages because of school fears concerning the impact on performance tables, and schools struggle to make A-Level language classes financially viable (Tinsley & Board, 2015b). The A-Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) recommended, as guiding principles for reform, that A-Levels should be intrinsically motivating and challenging but negotiable, and it gave careful consideration to concerns that the content was excessively ambitious (ALCAB, 2014).

Regarding literature, at least one literary work must be studied as part of a greater emphasis on knowledge and understanding of the culture and society of the language studied. However, from the beginning, there were calls in the ALCAB consultation to reconsider the compulsory study of literary works to widen the appeal of the qualification. The arguments against are that literature can appear unattractive to students and adds to the reputation of languages as being difficult (Raithby & Taylor, 2019).

Some teachers have seen the requirement as a demand imposed by several of the universities involved in the A-Level consultation. For instance, some

of the books proposed for study are derived from a traditional canon of texts which is seen as distant and unappealing to students (Raithby & Taylor, 2019, p. 10). ALCAB (2014) recommended extending the range of works eligible for study to include other genres such as biographies, journals, diaries, and letters, in order to offer a wider choice to students. More needs to be done in this respect, as many schools continue to rely on texts such as (for Spanish) *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, which is poetic and powerful in symbolism, but difficult for students to understand and interpret correctly. The choice of texts and the way in which they are taught are key to the successful implementation of the literature element.

To complete this necessarily brief survey of the current situation, universities are also facing challenges given the lower numbers of students applying for language degrees and the subsequent pressure to meet target numbers. As literature, especially in a foreign language, is viewed as challenging, time-consuming, and, again, lacking in relevance today, students are less accustomed to reading, and this impacts on the use/teaching of literature in university degree programmes. All the above results in a decline in specialist literature modules at university and a shift towards more film-based modules (Davis, 2018). This, in turn, leads to the pressing need to defend the teaching of literature in the language class and to find ways to present texts in creative and attractive forms that engage students and foster the study of languages (Puig & McLaughlin, 2019).

2.   The value of literature in the language classroom

In contrast with the situation just described, the benefits of the use of literature in the language class continue to be highlighted in recent research. Literature presents language in context: "language use in literature, then, is uniquely representative of the wider language" and it offers an opportunity to explore real human experiences and challenges (Hall, 2016, p. 458). One issue discussed is whether specific teacher training is required to use literature in the language class. Literature can be viewed as a tool just like any other used in language

teaching. The focus in the language class need not necessarily be on presenting the full historical knowledge or literary background in order to study a specific canonical work, but rather using the text as a resource to enhance language teaching: "the literary text is a resource to learn from rather than an icon to be taught" (Hall, 2016, p. 464). Teachers can therefore apply the pedagogical principles they are already familiar with to prepare tasks involving the use of literary texts.

Given the growing interest in intercultural communication, literature can provide meaningful insights into the culture of a specific country and can afford an opportunity for students to develop their imagination, think for themselves, and arrive at critical conclusions. Literature is interactive and can take account of social context and student profiles, so students react and produce new meaning while also harnessing the tools provided by new technologies to communicate and share. In this case, the teacher becomes more of a facilitator who transmits enthusiasm rather than imparts information (Reyes-Torres, 2018). Recent materials published include the collection by Diamantidaki (2019) which provides a range of examples using literature in different educational contexts in order to inspire staff and students.

It is important to recognise major and small achievements in the use of literature for language learning to foster a change in mentality. English as a foreign language is taught worldwide and includes the use of literature. The British Council has produced valuable materials for the study of Shakespeare, for example, and these are widely distributed[2]. More sharing of good practice is required to enable other languages to produce similar materials and reach larger audiences.

Literary anniversaries offer opportunities to test new and creative initiatives to engage the general public with literature. One such case was the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare and Cervantes in April 2016, when hundreds of events were organised all over the world. By way of

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2. See for instance www.britishcouncil.cn/en/shakespearelives/learning

example, at Manchester Metropolitan University, an event was created where students from different subjects and departments came together: language students read scenes in Spanish from *Don Quijote*. They were coached by the School of Theatre staff and practised with students from the degree, who in turn performed key scenes from Shakespeare's plays and acted out a fictitious encounter between Shakespeare and Cervantes. The experience was mutually enriching and certainly generated interest in both groups of students, who took to reading books by both authors.

3.   Conclusion

The way forward must be a combination of actions implemented at different levels (Herrero, 2019): it is important to continue to have a growing, research-led discipline to support future strategies for languages, which include literature as an asset in language learning.

Curriculum content must speak to a variety of social experiences and it is vital that the pitfalls identified in the new GCSEs and A-Levels are rectified, among them severe grading and ensuring appropriate attainment levels. More flexibility should be allowed to enable new texts and media to be incorporated into the teaching of the literature component together with more teacher training opportunities.

Finally, it is necessary to continue working towards a national strategy that supports language education, makes the study of languages compulsory, and helps communicate the value of languages and literature to the wider public.

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Literature in language learning: new approaches
Edited by Ana Bela Almeida, Ulrike Bavendiek, and Rosalba Biasini

Publication date: 2020/09/14