

1 Literature, challenge, and mediation in 21st century language learning

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Abstract

New directions in language learning and teaching are evident today. Students bring transnational, multicultural, multilingual, and digitally mediated experiences and identities into classrooms still sometimes too much modelled on outdated one-language-one-culture-one nation ideologies. Literature's value in these new circumstances is to challenge readers to independent interpretations, learning, and creativity, with refreshed understandings of what language, culture or indeed literature might be. In this paper I review some relevant recent interventions into the foreign language education field, including a reference to the [Council of Europe's \(2018\) Companion](#). I then give a brief example from my own use of a literary text in China.

Keywords: literature in multilingual and multicultural language learning, intercultural communication, literary translation, mediation, literature in CEFR Companion 2018.

1. Introduction and 21st century language learning

In the context of the call of [Kramersch \(2014\)](#) to recognise new multilingual and multicultural contexts for language learning, in this paper I discuss the potential of literature for intercultural communication and mediation – Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) ([Council of Europe, 2018](#)). New curriculum documents globally ask language educators to promote wider and more complex

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aims than simple language acquisition, including criticality, intercultural communication and empathy, creativity and innovation, independence, team working, ethics and emotional intelligence, and a host of other ‘21st century skills’ (Naji, Subramaniam, & White, 2019). Interestingly, these documents also increasingly allocate literature a role in pursuing such aims. The Council of Europe’s (2018) Companion to their globally influential 2001 ‘Framework’ document, intended to guide the design of materials and curricula for foreign language learning, now includes explicitly aesthetic and literary aims and suggests scales and descriptors (discussion in Alter & Ratheiser, 2019; another example is Ministry of Education Singapore, 2019).

A tremendous range of people now learn a major foreign language like English for a wide variety of reasons across widely varying contexts and circumstances. In all cases, nevertheless, a foreign language comes to be part of who we are and how we identify; it can indicate our aspirations or act as a sphere for imaginative exploration. Play, pleasure, and enjoyment are central to language learning, as are anxiety and stress very often (Bigelow, 2019).

Kramsch (2009, 2014) asks us to re-think the language learner as a ‘multilingual subject’. Borders between languages, cultures, and nations are porous, with migration and mobility increasingly the norm for many, together with the extended and pervasive interconnectedness the Internet promotes. The languages of literature are often mixed, hybrid, and prompt user attention to the fictitious nature of supposedly pure and correct standard national languages. The recognition of diversity and variety is common to modern understandings of language as well as basic to many literary texts, and needs to be learned and negotiated by language users. Literature prototypically deals with ‘margins’ of place, socioeconomic situation, class, religion, gender, language, and style. Reading literature, we need “to understand what and who is at the margins and why, and to enter the imaginative world of the marginal with compassion and radical openness” (Maginess, 2019, p. 140). The language learner, according to Kramsch (2009), has both the privileges and challenges of occupying this marginal relation to the foreign language they are learning. Traditional language learning research used static metaphors of acquisition, or input and output;

recent writers see more dynamic ‘appropriation’ or ‘participation’ in new and often challenging linguistic and cultural circumstances (Kramersch, 2014).

Second language acquisition research showed the importance of focusing on precise linguistic form for language learners (Schmidt, 2010). Literary texts often prompt such attention (Peplow, 2016). More recently, emotional engagement and feelings are highlighted as important and previously neglected elements of language learning (Bigelow, 2019). The meaningful and the moving are processed more deeply through appropriate literary texts. Critiques of commercial international and national materials used to support language learning thus suggest an important role for literature. Literature deals with ‘big’ issues; death, love, life, and relationships. It has personal relevance (Maley & Kiss, 2018). Commercial textbooks, by contrast, blandly observe the PARSNIP acronym referred to by Gray (2010); that is, textbook editors and writers look to avoid (in this shorthand) Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, ISMS, and Pork – in other words, all the engaging and moving stuff which literature typically concerns itself with!

From a world-wide English perspective, Matsuda (2003) asks for representations of and explicit materials and activities to address a central issue for the English language learner, that most users of English no longer hail from white middle class nuclear families in the UK or US. Saraceni (2015) argues the need for ‘a new mindset’ for teachers and learners of languages in the light of actual uses of English in particular around the world today, but likewise notes the sparsity of materials and training to support such change. Best-selling and prize-winning literature in recent years quickly make apparent the relevance of such texts to these demands.

2. Mediation

Literature reading involves ‘connecting’ with texts, and with others through texts, a kind of intercultural communication, and mediation, now widely specified as desiderata for language education. Cook (2010) as well as Garcia

and Wei (2014) have argued for increased use of translation at all stages of language learning. For such scholars, language learning should be additive rather than subtractive, comparative rather than exclusionary. Many literary texts meet this call as appropriately multilingual and multicultural. The Companion refers to a major and typical aim of language learning as preparation for mediation roles (translation and interpreting, broadly), working between languages, rather than exclusively in one language as opposed to another (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 208).

Finally, we should also note the potential for language learners of more recent ideas of creative texts and creativity as versioning, often through the Internet, typically multimodally, through adaptations, interventions, participation, spin offs and merchandising, fan websites (e.g. Harry Potter), parodies, pastiches, and the rest. Learners confront a world of continuous change and contested interpretation and response in need of mediation, which is exactly what literature offers paradigmatically too. Today's learners more than ever before need to deal with difference, diversity, and previously unexperienced varieties and variation, and to clarify their own stance in response.

Literature should not be thought of as a fixed canon of classic texts, but as creative writings and re-writings which engage the imagination and even the passions. Such writings can be more or less popular or demanding, and accessed at various levels from personal response and leisure reading, to more intellectual analysis, as suggested by the new CEFR Companion (Council of Europe, 2018, see '3 new literature scales' and descriptors, pp. 51, 65, 76, and 116).

3. An example: reading Pound's 'River-merchant's wife' in China

When mediating a creative translation of a creative text, a variation on CEFR's 'Mediating a text', roughly at level C2 descriptors (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 208), my students in China are undergraduates majoring in English, and English teachers on a taught Master's programme (CEFR C1). They were

asked to read Ezra Pound's (1916)² 'River-merchant's wife: a letter' from his collection 'Cathay', which did much in its day to confirm western stereotypes of 'the exotic East' for English language readers. My mostly Chinese students explored a text simultaneously alien but strangely familiar. Billings (2019) gives a comprehensive and critical textual account of the complex genesis of this poem and the wider collection it comes from. Briefly, knowing no Chinese, Pound wrote his own free version of a classic Chinese poem based on rough notes made by an American scholar based on his earlier studies with Japanese scholars of the Chinese classics. The poem derives ultimately from the classic 8th century Tang poet now usually known as Li Bai: here if anywhere is diversity, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the need for mediation.

My student readers often half recognised a poem they had studied respectfully and learned by heart in high school through the layers of cultural and linguistic mediation it had undergone. How to respond to this radically translated modernist English poem? A variation on a Chinese classic? Japanese hybrid (with Japan-China relations another complicating factor)? Reading and discussion of the poem inevitably prompted, engaged even, passionate exploration of the nature and ethics of creativity and innovation, and issues in translation and intercultural communication beyond the first linguistic and aesthetic experience of the poem itself. Real communication resulted from our different perspectives and the different knowledge, experience, and values, either linguistic, social, or cultural, that teacher and students brought to the reading, with mutual and cooperative learning taking place. Critical readings included resistance to foreigners appropriating half understood texts, but then also an appreciation for the creativity of using the old to make something new for new times and the new perspectives Pound's version prompted. There is no space to report in detail here, though I urge readers to consider the poem for themselves – or better still try to use it in a class – in order to explore the claims I make for its value. It is a discomfiting if sometimes beautiful poem, and that was its value for us. Here was the productive discomfort, the challenge, as well as the pleasure, a literary text can bring into a classroom. Not all classes will be at this level,

2. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47692/the-river-merchants-wife-a-letter-56d22853677f9>

though I would note that some of the most admired lines were the simplest – “They hurt me, I grow older” (l. 25). My urging is rather to consider the kind of rich interactions and felt experience a well-chosen literary text can promote.

4. Conclusion

I have sought in this brief paper to suggest that new language learning contexts give literary texts new relevance. Issues of mediation, translation, and intercultural communication which are inherent to much literature can be of real interest to our multilingual and multicultural students as they strive to learn a language and to see the value of foreign language learning. Educators now seek to promote creativity and critical thinking in students, empathy with others, and emotional intelligence, as well as well-being and a love for lifelong learning. The connections literary texts embody and promote can be of great value for these wider aims as well as for more concentrated language-focused work, where careful choices have been made by writers and performers precisely to foster contemplation and discussion in often complex and difficult areas which can really engage learners.

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