Using authentic literature to teach reading at EFL classes

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Abstract

The paper studies the issue of using authentic literary texts in an English as a foreign language classroom. The significance of the topic is determined by the necessity to select appropriate reading material for students during the EFL course. The purpose of the article is to study various types of reading and to choose the most applicable one for the EFL course, cover the issue of reading literature in the language classroom, study the differences between various types of adaptation and authentic texts, their advantages and disadvantages and to choose successful strategy to teach reading authentic texts. The methods of comparison and collation, classification and generalization were used during the research. The development of a skill of reading authentic literature was chosen as the main target. Definitions of authentic literature and different types of adaptation were compared and their use at EFL lessons was specified. The results of the research could be applied by EFL teachers and educators to master their EFL/ ESL teaching practice.

Keywords: university education, student education, EFL, teaching reading, authentic literature, adaptation.
1. Introduction

Learning to read is one of the basic perceptive skills that a student has to acquire while studying at an EFL course. The strategy selected by the teacher will depend on many factors - the school curriculum, the student’s level of English, the teacher’s preferences and experience. When we talk about reading material, nowadays teachers may choose from a variety of sources – prepared textbook materials, authentic literary works and loads of texts from the Internet. However, while the teacher devises the strategy of teaching particular students, he will have to answer the questions of what to read and how to read. The first question implies the choice between a literary and non-literary text, the second makes him choose between an authentic and adapted text. This article considers choosing the appropriate type of reading in a foreign language course [Passov, 2002; Folomkina, 1987; Klychnikova, 1983; Yazar, 2013, Alyousef, 2005], studies different arguments for and against literary and non-literary texts in the classroom [Wallace, 1992; Tatsuki, 2015] and discusses the problem of using adapted and authentic reading material [Simensen, 1990; Frey et al, 2012; Daskalos & Ling, 2005; Campbell, 1987].

2. Methodological framework

Before choosing the strategy of teaching and the appropriate text for reading, three main points should be covered. First, we should distinguish between different types of reading and their definitions and choose the ones which are the most applicable to be used for teaching reading. Second, the debatable issue of using literature in the English classroom should be viewed. Third, the difference between authentic and adapted texts should be considered.

2.1 Types of reading

In methodological literature, we find many different types of reading, based on different criteria: synthetic or analytical (in other terminology, top-down or bottom-up), immediate and translated, communicative or academic reading.

Traditionally, Russian EFL methodologists single out three main types of reading, based on the purpose of reading and the organization of the reading process. The types are skimming (reading for gist or skim reading), scanning (reading for specific information) and reading for comprehension (reading for detail) [See Passov, 2002; Folomkina, 1987; Klychnikova, 1983]. Skimming requires general understanding of the text, learning its main points without going deep into details. Thus, students learn how to summarize the text and avoid focusing on unfamiliar grammar structures and lexical units. This type of reading is necessary to deal with any unknown text at the very first stage – to understand its genre, general purpose and main idea.

Scanning is used to search for necessary information in the text (data, numbers, names etc.) or, after looking at the material, detect if the text contains necessary information. This type of reading is also quite frequently used in professional sphere and everyday life – when, for instance, one needs to look through large volume of information and decide if it is relevant and necessary.

Reading for detail (reading for detailed comprehension) implies complete and thorough understanding of all facts and details, their comprehension and memorizing. As a result, a learner should be able to evaluate, comment on or clarify the peculiarities of the studied text.

Yazar [2013], following the research results, singles out other types of reading, except the ones mentioned above:
- intensive and extensive reading [see also Alyousef, 2005],
- search reading,
- receptive reading,
- critical reading,
- reading for meaning,
- prediction,
- redundancy. [Yazar, 2013].

The researcher emphasizes reading for meaning as one of the most valuable for EFL teaching.

According to the purpose of reading, Berardo [2006] uses the criteria of purpose as the basis and classifies reading to reading for survival, reading for learning and reading for pleasure. The first type uses reading as a response to urgent everyday situations. Reading for learning is done in the classroom for study purposes, whereas reading for pleasure is the only one, which is done on a voluntary basis and used for entertainment.

2.2 Using literature in EFL classroom

Still, there is a lot of debate on whether to use literature at EFL classes. Literature has been used as the source for teaching a foreign language since ancient times. But the XXth century brought in some changes into this approach. With the development of TESL/TEFL methodology the idea of a “functionally competent user” of a foreign language has become prevailing [Wallace, 1992]. This approach does not see fiction or a literary text as an appropriate source for teaching a foreign language. Fortunately, numerous followers of the idea to use literature see its stimulating and motivating effect to teach EFL/ESL courses. As a result, literary texts have been reintroduced to many countries’ study programs and curricula [Tatsuki, 2015].

2.3 Authentic and adapted texts

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines the phenomenon of authenticity as of “the quality of being real or true” [Longman, 2003]. Simensen [1990] prefers the term “original” to “authentic” and uses the term “adapted” for various alterations in the text. Nunan [1989] sees authentic materials as the ones that have been produced for purposes other than language teaching [quoted in Erkaya, 2005, p. 2]. Frey et al [2012] view the term “authentic” as “having something to do with the real world” [Frey et al, 2012, 1]. Daskalos & Ling [2005] consider authentic material as “books and articles where language and structure are not simplified in any way” [Daskalos & Ling, 2005, p. 11]. These authors see the term “authentic” as “a reaction against fabricated artificial language” [Ibid], which is mostly used in textbooks.

Taking into consideration the definitions mentioned above, we consider the term “authentic” as the material which has been produced for native speakers, which has not been altered in any way and the purpose of which was not language teaching.

We should also see the difference between different types of adaptation and consider its distinction from authentic material.

Campbell [1987] points out the peculiarities of adaptation, its linguistic and lexical simplification and linguistic standardization. Adaptation can exist in a form of abridgement and rewriting. Abridgement involves editing sub-plots, detail, simplification of a narrative structure,
which makes it linear. Rewriting is another form of adaptation, when lexis and syntactic structures are rewritten and given in their simpler forms in order to match the readers’ level. [Campbell, 1987, p. 132].

3. Results

As the scope of our research is the issue of using authentic literature in the process of teaching EFL reading, we think that reading for detailed comprehension and reading for meaning are the most significant, as they require the combination of different learned skills. Except the fact that learners should possess sufficient grammar and vocabulary knowledge, comprehend syntactic structures and have enough background knowledge, they should be able to elicit the meaning of the text as a work of literature. It means that students should read and perceive a literary text as a whole, interpret it according to the learner’s experience, analyze and comment on it. This, of course, means that the level of foreign knowledge should be sufficient for such a complicated activity.

These types of reading also correspond well with extensive (in the meaning of both quantity and quality of the material) and intensive (explore the meaning and understand the writing mechanisms) reading [Alyousef, 2005, p. 145-146].

According to Nuttall [1982, 1996], the final overall goal of teaching reading is to teach students read unfamiliar non-adapted texts. Ideally, all these skills should bring students to reading authentic literature for pleasure, which we consider to be the highest developing point while teaching reading.

We support the point of view that literature should be used in a language classroom and insist that using literature in a foreign language classroom could be highly motivating and beneficial for learners, providing them with authentic and genuine language and cultivating good taste.

Taking into account the points mentioned by N. Campbell, not all adapted (rewritten or abridged) texts can be successfully used in a language classroom. The reason is that lexical or grammatical simplification is done by native speakers, who might not be familiar with the words, difficult for particular learners. The second reason could be oversimplification of the literary text, which results in the loss of narrative interest by the readers [Campbell, 1987, p. 134].

Daskalos & Ling [2005] suppose that EFL/ESL textbooks use texts with removed cultural component (the reason of a text being more difficult), which makes textbook material artificial and uninteresting. Thus, lexical adaptation may sometimes lead to the lack of cultural interest.

Adaptation should only be used when the learners’ level of English prevents them from understanding the text thoroughly. At the same time, adapted reading can be successfully used for preparing students to read authentic texts. We agree that at the initial stages of learning a foreign language, adaptations are necessary, though they can be substituted by simpler authentic texts like fairy tales or nursery rhymes.

When the volume of vocabulary and grammar increases, students may start getting acquainted with an authentic literary text. The process of switching from adapted to non-adapted material should be performed carefully; otherwise students might lose their interest and motivation. The first authentic texts for reading should meet certain requirements, such as:

- be preferably short than long,
- have a simple plot and set of characters,
- should not be overwhelmed by complicated vocabulary,
- be easily interpreted,
should be relevant to the students’ needs,
- do not contain any irregular linguistic forms (e.g., dialects, slang etc.)
- should be interesting for students.

At the same time, careful preparation is extremely important if the teacher chooses an authentic text. The teacher must follow three traditional methodological steps in preparing the reading class – pre-reading, while reading and post reading stages.

The pre-reading stage overcomes difficulties of linguistic and socio-cultural character. The while-reading stage “is used to encourage the learner to be a flexible, active reader and also promote a dialogue between reader and writer” [Berardo, 2006, p. 65]. The post-reading stage usually includes comprehension check in the form of questions, true/false questions etc.

4. Discussions

As reading is one of the key aspects of language teaching and learning, it has been thoroughly discussed among researchers and methodologists. Christine Nuttall’s “Teaching reading skills in a foreign language” [1982, 1996] can be called the teacher’s manual. It contains the basics of L2 teaching methodology and the author’s valuable experience.

C. Wallace has also described her experience of teaching various age and social groups and has written several articles and books on teaching different skills. Among them reading has been the focus of her attention, including the aspect of using authentic texts [Wallace, 1992, 2006].

L. Hamp-Lyons, the author of several textbooks from the University of Edinburgh has devised her own “text-strategic” approach to teaching reading, which can be generalized and used to work with any text.

Nancy Campbell’s research on various types of adaptation, based on comparison of authentic and adapted texts [Campbell, 1987] was very valuable and useful for the present article and teaching practice.

Many other authors have studied the problem of using adapted and authentic texts in the EFL classroom [Simensen, 1990; Berardo, 2006; Alyousef, 2005, Erkaya, 2005, Frey et al, 2012, Daskalos & Ling, 2005]. All of them are practicing teachers and their experience has been extremely helpful from both theoretical and practical points of view.

5. Conclusion

This article studied different types of reading from the point of view of Russian and foreign methodologists. We have studied the issue of using literary texts in the classroom and came to the conclusion that literature is still a precious source of living and “real” language, which also fosters good taste. Talking about the authenticity of reading material, both adapted and authentic texts can be used in the classroom, although certain conditions should be satisfied – the appropriateness of the text for students from lexical, grammatical, meaningful and stylistic point of view and careful preparation from the teacher’s side. Therefore, authentic literary text can be used in the course of EFL teaching even if the learner’s level is not very high. It demands additional work from the teacher’s side (creating pre-, while- and post-reading exercises; selecting appropriate and interesting texts), but the result will be students’ increased motivation and self-confidence, because they manage to work with authentic literature.
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References

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