

# THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING LITERATURE FOR THE FUTURE L2 TEACHER

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the fact that literature gives the Letras/English student the opportunity to come in contact with varieties of the English language in texts that are not pedagogically controlled, and that are written by authors from cultural sites spread throughout the world. In addition, literature offers the chance of hearing the multiple voices that deal with the use of English as an expression of non Anglo identities. The article exemplifies these questions through literary extracts and seeks to show the necessity of the study of literature for the future teacher of English.*

KEY-WORDS: *literature; identity; varieties*

## RESUMO

*Este trabalho discute o fato de que a literatura oferece a oportunidade ao aluno de Letras/Inglês de entrar em contato com variedades não controladas pedagogicamente por meio de textos escritos por autores vindos de culturas espalhadas pelo mundo. A literatura também fornece oportunidades de ouvir as múltiplas vozes que abordam o uso da língua inglesa enquanto expressão de identidades não anglófonas. O artigo exemplifica essas questões com trechos de obras literárias e busca comprovar a necessidade do estudo da literatura para o futuro professor de língua inglesa.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *literatura; identidade; variedades*

## Introduction

The students in the *Letras/English* course are young adults preparing to be teachers of the English language in public and private schools. Literatures of the English language, however, are not taught as a separate subject in these schools. What then is the place of literature in the curriculum of the *Letras/English* course? This is the question that I hope to answer in this article, principally by focusing on one important aspect of learning another language, that is, the contact that is necessary with the multiple voices of the L2.

In order to undertake this task of arguing for the need of studying literature in the *Letras/English* course, I will first discuss the kind of language that a student is initially exposed to. Then I will present some of the many voices that the student can interact with through the texts used in the literature classroom.

## Simplified Language

In this section I will briefly outline some concepts that are related to the theory of simplified language for L2 learners in and outside the classroom.

In 1971, Charles Ferguson in an article entitled, *Absence of copula: a study of normal speech, baby talk, foreigner talk, and pidgins*, posited the existence of foreigner talk, a type of simplified speech deemed appropriate for use with hearers who do not have full understanding of the L2. Foreigner Talk is often ungrammatical such as in the following question which omits the copula *be* and does not invert to form the interrogative form, “You going to the party?”. It is

important to point out that the non inversion for the question format is common in oral English varieties. The absence, however, of the copula *be* is a characteristic of simplified speech.

In 1972 the publication of *Functions of language in the classroom*, edited by Courtney Cazden, Vera John, and Dell Hymes focused on the classroom as a place of language study. From this vantage point, Teacher Talk began to be described. The characteristic of this type of speech is simplification when the instructor teaches beginning or middle-level students. Teacher Talk is different from Foreigner Talk in that it is not ungrammatical, consequently it is a good model to follow. However, it tends to be repetitive and redundant as can be attested in the following example, “Are you going to the party? It’s at night, at 6 p.m.”. The words *night* and *p.m.* are not both necessary as they refer to the same time period. In both Foreigner Talk and Teacher Talk there are certain prosodic features such as slowness of speech, and careful articulation that accompany these types of speech events. (cf. Amy Tsui, 1995, for a discussion of classroom interaction).

This leads to positing that there exists a variety of language found only in the L2 classroom which can be designated as “classroomese”. Though this variety has not been designated by linguists as a specific variety, it is possible, based on my years of classroom observation, to enumerate some of the characteristics of this type of speech: the use of complete sentences at all times, slower speech rate, limited vocabulary, and the fact that in oral exchanges the student’s speech is frequently responded to either with approbation such as using the word, “good” or, when the student says something that is grammatically incorrect, asking the student to repeat the answer, “Say your answer again”, and in this way letting the student know that a mistake has been committed.

Furthermore, there tends to be an emphasis on the orate forms of language in the beginning to the middle level stages which are linked to a more informal register. There is a consequent difficulty in reading and producing complex texts at more advanced stages, a fact that has been discussed by Kramsch (1993, p. 130). Needless to say, language is intricate and demands a knowledge of appropriateness and register to be able to be used adequately. For example, the following words are in the same semantic field and can be considered synonyms, but their use demands a knowledge of the appropriate register in order to make the correct decision about their use: *on the ball, sharp, brainy, smart, intelligent, \perceptive, astute*. To be able to understand the differences in meaning and use and then to use them adequately requires going beyond a simplified, orate knowledge of language.

In addition to a discussion of the classroom language itself, I believe it is necessary to take into consideration the distinction between the L2 classroom and the Foreign Language classroom. Though for the most part no differentiation is made between Second Language and Foreign Language students as far as acquisition studies are concerned (cf. ELLIS, 2001), I believe it is necessary to point out that the students of the *Letras/ingles* course are learning their second language in a Foreign Language setting since the students are learning English in a classroom environment with few opportunities to engage in active use with other speakers/users in everyday contexts. The classroom is often the moment in which the student has the most contact with the English language, at least at the first stages of learning. Hence it is possible to state that at the beginning to the middle levels English learning, the student has contact with a more simplified, controlled form of the language with little opportunity in everyday life to come in contact with more complex and varied forms of the language. Naturally as the student progresses and becomes more interested in the language, s/he will seek out on his/her own more varied opportunities of use, but these usually are still orate forms of language appropriate for social networks such as Facebook and others.

### **What the literature class offers**

In this section, I will briefly discuss the language characteristics that can be found in literary texts. These characteristics have links to social, historical and cultural identities. Hence the student who participates in the literature classroom comes into contact with voices that use the L2 and that are from different social classes, historical moments, and cultural groups.

Through literary texts the student comes in contact with varieties that are not controlled pedagogically, in other words, varieties that are not simplified. As can be seen in the following

extract from Charles Dickens' novella, *A Christmas Carol*, the vocabulary is rich, not reduced to simple descriptive words such as, good, bad, pretty, cold, hot and so on. Rather the nuances of the different aspects of the very cold weather are described in highly creative forms and can lead the reader to understand and even experience the situation vicariously.

Once upon a time - of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve - old Scrooge sat busy in his counting house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal; and he could hear the people in the court outside, go wheezing up and down, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already - it had not been light all day - and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. To see the dingy cloud come drooping down, obscuring everything, one might have thought that Nature lived hard by, and was brewing on a large scale (p. 6).

As can be attested in the list of descriptive words used to describe the weather *cold*, *bleak*, *biting*, the student/reader is led on into a more minute depiction of what cold weather can be like: bleak - gloomy and somber, biting - a cold that penetrates, implying there is a wind. It is at this point that the student can begin to perceive the vast possibilities of descriptive words in the L2, and the details that can be depicted and brought to the foreground as coldness is described. Further on, in the description of the candles burning, "like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air", it is possible to comprehend that the candles are seen through the windows as blots of red light because the air is brown, that is, there is smog settling down over the city. This description continues in the last sentence of the paragraph in the line, "the dingy cloud came drooping down, obscuring everything". Thus it is not just fog which is white, but fog and smoke which forms a dingy or a dirty cloud. In this way, the student when reading a text such as this one comes into contact with a vocabulary that is precise and sophisticated in its descriptions. As the student wrestles with the ways of expression that are new to her/him, s/he will begin to perceive how a description can be detailed, nuanced, and alive in its painting of a certain moment in time.

In like manner, when reading a text such as this one, the student enters into a fictional world that has a particular socio-historic setting. In this case, it is London of the 1840s, a time of air pollution, no electricity, coal fires, poverty, and therefore certain social practices that are no longer in place. On coming to an understanding of the time and place of the setting, the student learns about another cultural moment in which the English language was used and, in turn, can comprehend the link to the Englishes in use today. Naturally this process of comprehension depends in part on the explication and discussions led by the teacher.

Through literature the student also has the opportunity to come in contact with colloquial varieties of English used in different settings. The myth of a homogeneous structure called the English language can be repeatedly debunked in texts that deviate from the standard form. In the language classroom, it is the standard form that is taught, but in the literature classroom it is possible to come into contact with non-standard forms, and with the Englishes that are being used around the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These non-standard forms can come from post-colonial texts or can come from texts that are much older. In this way, another myth, that the English language was more homogeneous at some time in the past and is now deviating more and more from a fixed standard, can also be shown to be false.

An extract from the American novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain is an example of colloquial, non-standard English of a particular region in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century:

Y-o-u-u, Tom!

There was a slight noise behind her and she turned in time to seize a small boy by the slack of his roundabout and arrest his flight.

‘There, I might ‘a thought of that closet. What you been doing in there?’  
‘Nothing’.  
‘Nothing! Look at your hands! And look at your mouth! What is that truck?’  
‘I don’t know aunt’.  
‘Well, I know. It’s jam – that’s what it is! Forty times I’ve said if you didn’t  
leave jam alone I’d skin you. Hand me that switch’.  
The switch hovered in the air — the peril was des-  
perate —  
‘My! Look behind you, aunt!’  
The old lady whirled round, and snatched her skirts out of danger. The lad  
fled on the instant, scrambled up the high board-fence, and disappeared over  
it.  
His aunt Polly stood surprised a moment, and then broke into a gentle laugh.  
(p. 4).

In the extract, it is possible to see the form of calling someone who is thought to be at a certain distance away, “Y-o-u-u”. There is also the question of pronunciation, “I might ‘a thought” and the dropping of the verb *have* in the question, “What you been doing in there?”, both of which are forms of colloquial non-standard English. As well, it is possible to see an informal and variety specific use of the word “truck” which in other varieties would be rendered by the words “junk” or “stuff”, as in “What is that stuff?” instead of “What is that truck?”. Consequently a broadening of the understanding of varieties and how they show regional identities comes to the fore while reading a passage such as this.

In addition, broader discussions about childhood and the place of children in society as well as their discipline and what it means to bring a child up in different cultures come forward. Literature broadens the student/reader’s conception of the world and of sociological facts.

Another example of colloquial English can be found in the Canadian novel *Who Has Seen the Wind* by W.O. Mitchell.

“What about the tree?”  
“It was doin’ all right.”  
“Without thinking,” primed Digby.  
“Without thinkin’, I said to myself, ‘That there tree is doin’ all right, an’ it’s doin’ it without thinkin’. Me – I think - I’m havin’ one hell of a time.”  
“Are you?”  
“Yep. I’m givin’ it up.”  
“Thinking?”  
“Thinkin’.”  
“Can you do it?”  
“I kin try. May come hard at first, but I kin try. I’ll take a good run at her – maybe make me a better man”.(p. 136)

In this example the difference is in the two varieties, that is, rural, not educated versus educated. The rural variety does not pronounce the -ing- as a velar nasal consonant [ŋ]. Instead it is pronounced as an alveolar nasal consonant [n]. There is also the pronunciation of the modal can as “kin”. Once again, it is possible to say that the literary text offers opportunities for discussions of how language varieties can show social class and region and specifically how the English language shows this. The complexity of language in general and the English language in particular, which is the target language for the student/reader, becomes more apparent. The gap between the reality of the English language and all its manifestations and the English of textbooks and earlier language classes is closed, in some measure, by contact with texts from literature that depict definite settings and the speech used there.

Literature also offers the opportunity to encounter English used in different socio-historical settings, reflecting different cultures and mores, in other words, an encounter with the literatures of the world englishes.

The following is the poem *sailing the deep* by the Métis poet Rita Bouvier:

I will take with me  
miyomaskihki – sacred medicine

nimoshôm'pan – my late grandfather  
a way of being with you in silence

nimâmâ - my mother  
a presence at the end of the line

ninâpîm – my one man  
a good love like no other

nokosis – my son  
a tale of spiders in rubber suction boots

nisîmis – my younger sibling  
a belief there is always room for one more

niwîcîwâk anak – the ones with whom I make a path  
a reading of the great mystery

nohkom'pan – my late grandmother  
a prayer when there is no where else to turn (p. 18).

In this poem the student/reader comes in contact with a writer who is not from the Anglo culture and uses English along with her heritage language to express herself. Rita Bouvier as a Métis, one of the First Nations of Canada, expresses her culture through the use of the English language and words from Cree. The poem expresses concepts about living which are quite different from Anglo cultural concepts of life, “niwîcîwâk anak - the ones with whom I make a path”, shows life expressed in community with those who live with you and with those who are your ancestors. Thus the literature class creates the opportunity for the student to understand that the English language is used as an expression of cultures that are many and varied and that are outside the Anglo cultural sphere.

Another example of English showing a regional variety that expresses different socio-cultural settings is the extract from the poem *Calypso* by Kamau Braithwaite

1  
The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands:  
Cuba and San Domingo  
Jamaica and Puerto Rico  
Grenada Guadeloupe Bonaire

curved stone hissed into reef  
wave teeth fanged into clay  
white splash flashed into spray  
Bathsheba Montego Bay

bloom of the arcing summers...

4  
Steel drum steel drum  
hit the hot calypso dancing  
hot rum hot rum  
who goin' stop this bacchanalling?

For we glance the banjoy  
dance the limbo  
grow our crops by maljo

have loose morals  
gather corals  
father out neighbour's quarrels

perhaps when they come  
with their cameras and straw  
hats: sacred pink tourists from the frozen Nawth

we should get down to those  
white beaches  
where if we don't wear breeches

it becomes an island dance  
*Some people doin' well*  
*while others are catchin' hell*

o the boss gave our Johnny the sack  
though we beg him please  
please to take 'im back

so now the boy nigratin' overseas...

In this poem, the Caribbean culture is expressed through Nation Language, one of the world englishes. As Braithwaite (1996, p. 269) states, "Nation language is the language that is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of its lexicon, but it is not English in terms of its syntax". He goes on to point out that the rhythm and timbre are different from those of Anglo English.

As well as the use of Nation Language, it is possible to see a criticism of the situation of domination lived in the Caribbean and the prejudice that exists against the people of Afro descent of those islands. This is seen in the ironic voice that asks, "who goin stop this bacchanalling?" in which the island dances such as calypso are interpreted as being somehow illicit. The voice continues, "For we glance the banjoy/dance the limbo/grow our crops by maljo/have loose morals" and as it lists the negative statements made against the inhabitants of the Caribbean, it is possible to perceive the poetic voice's anger at this situation. The student/reader studying a poem like this in literature class, learns how to recognize irony, and learns how other groups that use the English language outside of the circles of power feel and express their situation. The ironic voice continues in the poem as it refers to the "sacred pink tourists from the frozen Nawth", depicting the Caribbean as a playground for the Northern Hemisphere. The need for the tourist money is implied, but at the same time the anger at the economic situation, shown in the last line of the poem, "so now the boy nigratin' overseas", presents the situation of many Caribbean residents who leave their islands to migrate to Great Britain, Canada, and the USA because of economic difficulties. Thus a poem such as this one provides the possibility of understanding more about language use (the irony), varieties, and cultures that express their real life situations through different varieties of the English language.

Moreover, through literature, the student/reader has the opportunity to read texts that discuss the English language as linked to imperialism (The British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) and globalization (21<sup>st</sup> Century). Is English a threat to other languages or not? This is a discussion that has many answers and is pertinent today. Should a writer write in English if their L1 is another language? This also is a discussion with many opinions and points of view. In literature class it is possible to read texts that discuss exactly these questions and to hear

different voices, speaking from various parts of the world about the place of the English language.

In the following poem, *The Old Language* by Welsh poet R.S. Thomas a discussion about what occurs when a language dies is presented:

England, what have you done to make the speech  
My fathers used a stranger to my lips,  
An offence to the ear, a shackle on the tongue  
That would fit new thoughts to an abiding tune?  
Answer me now. The workshop where they wrought  
Stands idle, and thick dust covers their tools.  
The blue metal of streams, the copper and gold  
Seams in the wood are all unquarried; the leaves'  
Intricate filigree falls, and who shall renew  
Its brisk pattern? When spring wakens the hearts  
Of the young children to sing, what song shall be theirs?

The student/reader will have to deal with sophisticated metaphors in order to understand the poem. S/he will have to understand how a language can be compared to mining a precious metal and to having a workshop that is not used anymore, but is covered with dust. This is a far cry from any simplified, pedagogically controlled language. Beyond this, the student has the opportunity to hear a voice discussing how losing one's heritage language is losing something precious that is part of one's identity. The memory of that language remains and English is always the language that has been imposed even if it is the only language that one speaks. This poem links in to pertinent discussions in the area of bilingualism, and heritage, and minority languages.

Another poem that discusses the use of English as a means of expression outside the Anglo culture is the poem *Introduction* by Kamala Das. The following is an excerpt from this poem:

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,  
I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one.  
Don't write in English they said, English is  
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? The language I speak,  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses  
All mine, mine alone.  
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,  
It is as human as I am human, don't  
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my  
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing  
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it  
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is  
Here and not there, a mind that sees and  
Hears and  
Is aware.

In the poem, questions arise of multilingualism, and the appropriation of English to express an identity. This identity is expressed through a different syntax, "its queernesses", but it is "honest" and vital and is "human speech". Nevertheless, this use is criticized by the people who surround the one who chooses to use English, for English is understood as not being the

L1, the mother tongue. Nonetheless, as the poetic voice states, “it is as useful to me as cawing/is to crows or roaring to the lions”. English, with a distinct characteristic of local identity, half English, half Indian, becomes a necessity for the expression of a particular identity. As Achebe (1965, apud MILLER, 1996, p. 280) states, “the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use”. Thus the question of standard English and varieties becomes an integral part of literature class of the English class. The question of the appropriation of the English language to express local identities is of utmost relevance as the student him or herself is learning to express his/her local Brazilian identity through the English language.

In the poem, by Evangelina Vigil (1994, p. 166), on the other hand, both English and Spanish are used to express the identity of an immigrant who belongs to two places, with borders that are not fixed but are porous, thus the possibility exists of going from one language to another.

recuerdos  
like that autumn leaf you singled out  
and saved  
pressed between the memories of your mind  
diary never written  
but always remembered, felt  
scripted en tu mente -  
your daughters will never read it  
but they'll inherit it  
and they'll know it  
when they look into your eyes  
shining luz de amor, corazón  
unspoken, untold  
keepsake for our treasure chests  
que cargamos aquí adentro  
radiant with jewels  
sculpted by sentimientos y penas  
y bastante amor:

This type of situation is also apparent in texts by Glória Anzaldúa as, for example, in her statement about being a *mestiza* (1999, p. 99):

Because I, a *mestiza*,  
continually walk out of one culture  
into another,  
because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*  
*Estoy norteadada por todas las vocês que me hablan*  
*simultáneamente.*

Literature class is the place of discussing language as it is linked to personal identity and through texts such as these that have been presented, Das, Vigil and Anzaldúa, it is possible to see the different solutions for those who live in a world in which English is a dominant language and in a world of mass migrations. How languages become a part of personal identity is an integral question to be discussed by any future teacher of an L2 and in these discussions language is not defined simply in its transactional possibilities, but as a place of power, identity, and resistance.



## Concluding Remarks

Literature class allows the student to come into contact with many text types and genres. S/he reads novels, novellas, poetry, drama in the four semesters of literature that occur in the *Letras/English* course. As the student goes through these semesters, his/her knowledge of the language grows. S/he learns more vocabulary, becomes capable of dealing with complex sentences, along with difficult concepts presented in figurative language. In other words, s/he grows in his/her language competence and leaves behind the simplified variety of the initial language classroom.

At the same time, the student grows in his/her contact with the multiple voices expressing their identities in the Englishes of the world. These identities encompass different times, different places. Language is intimately linked to the expression of social class, gender, heritage, ethnic group, and so on. As the student reads a variety of texts, s/he begins to widen his/her world view and understand that the English language cannot be reduced to one socially acceptable variety, to one nation, to the language of a hegemonic group.

Furthermore, there is the question of the position of the English language and how it has spread throughout the world due to imperialism and now globalization. The English language has not become a world language in a power vacuum. In literature class, these topics occur naturally in the texts studied, written by those who are struggling with these questions. In this way, the student reading poetry, novels, plays from different groups around the world enters into the wider discussion of the place of the English language locally and globally and in its expression of identities. As I have already stated, these topics are essential for the future English language teacher to wrestle with for they are part of his/her own identity as Brazilian speakers of the English language and teachers of this language to other Brazilians.

Finally, without a study of literature, the future teacher would have an impoverished education, with a limited knowledge of the way the English language has been and is used. There would also be a limited awareness of the way the language has changed as it has spread around the world and a limited understanding of important discussions regarding the appropriation of English in the post-colonial period. Thus, the study of literature is vital for the future teacher since it is through literature that s/he will have access to the multiple voices of the L2.

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