Learning and Enjoying Literature in English

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An introduction to issues and methods in teaching imaginative literature in the EFL classroom.

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Literature can be a daunting subject for foreign students of English. The complexity and open-ended nature of literary interpretation often contain a high “fear factor” for them. “I’m interested in literature,” one student confided in her class journal early one semester. “But to tell the truth, I’m afraid. I don’t think our class can understand what you teach.”

Teachers of literature also struggle with how to approach this subject. Previous reading classes may not have prepared students for the kinds and styles of language encountered in a literature class. For foreign teachers, cultural differences in interpretive approaches and educational methodologies can force changes in plans and expectations. Background knowledge cannot be taken for granted. Time is limited.

These challenges are not as overwhelming as they might first appear, however. In fact, literature can be the “crown jewel” in an English major’s coursework, an impetus to both significant learning and great enjoyment. To make this outcome possible, a literature teacher needs to think through some basic issues in constructing a syllabus and to choose appropriate methods in creating lesson plans.

Organizing a Course

There are a number of ways to organize a course syllabus for literature, including:

- **By linguistic feature.** The course readings are chosen with an eye to teaching specific points of grammar, rhetoric, lexicology, or linguistics. The goal is for students to see holistically how language works at both functional and artistic levels.
- **By genre.** The course is organized according to literary forms, including poetry, essays, short stories, and dramas. The central goal is for students to be able to interpret and distinguish among the conventions of the various genres.
- **By history.** The course is organized chronologically, following the literary history of whichever nation or group is being studied. The main goal is to learn history, including not only biographies and events but also aesthetic theories and movements.
- **By topic.** The course readings are organized following a handful of universal themes, such as love, justice, suffering, death, or friendship. The most important goal is for students to explore deeply significant themes in human experience. A sample reading sequence on death might include such works as: “The Open Boat” by Stephen Crane (a story in which a group of men adrift in a lifeboat hope for rescue); “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas (poem); *Holy Sonnet 10*, “Death be not proud,” by John Donne (poem); and “The Death of the Moth” by Virginia Woolf (essay).

How should a teacher choose which approach to use primarily? First, he needs to consider students’ levels and needs. What previous reading have they done? Why are they taking this class? What are they likely to do with literature in the future? Second, he should find out the university’s purpose in including a literature course in the curriculum. What are the department’s goals? Finally, practical limitations need to be taken into account, such as available textbooks, photocopying facilities, and library resources. (It is recommended that teachers bring their own anthologies, or even better, a CD-ROM of classic literature, in order to increase the available reading selections.)

In organizing a syllabus and planning out class sessions, several other goals are also desirable. Students will read, write, speak, and listen, integrating all their language skills in one place. Literature should not become simply an auxiliary reading course, but a place to do something with skills learners have been acquiring in other classes. If this is done, the class will be communicative or interactive, rather than a series of informational lectures. Personal benefit or enjoyment of...
literature is also a legitimate goal, especially since in most cases Vietnamese students will never again formally study literature in a foreign language.

A final goal in constructing a course plan is the development of interpretive skills. For the sake of simplicity, it is often best to focus on three interrelated elements:

- **Text.** What does the language itself signify? How is the overall literary work constructed?
- **Author.** What is the intended meaning of the writer? What biographical or cultural information might be necessary to answer this question?
- **Reader.** How would readers of that day have responded? How might modern readers view this work?

Nonfiction can be a good way to give students a basic introduction to literary styles and these interpretive techniques. For example, in my American Literature class, students read an excerpt from the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin—the famous episode in which the young Franklin first arrives in Philadelphia tired, ragged, and nearly penniless. I then ask students to draw conclusions about Franklin’s character from his actions (without necessarily knowing anything else about his life). When we read the first chapter of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, I stress seeing through the author’s eyes. As he introduces life under slavery, we gain firsthand understanding and empathy. In both lessons, Vietnamese students are able to move from the concrete to the abstract, taking their first steps in interpretation. It is worth noting that they can do so without much background information or teacher assistance, despite wide historical-cultural gaps between Franklin/Douglass and themselves.

**Knowing Your Audience**

Knowing what your students need, want, lack, and desire in their study of literature is a key to success not only in organizing a syllabus, but also in every lesson plan and even every episode of class interaction. Such information may not appear directly applicable, but it shapes and guides how we interact with our students as whole persons.

General questions might include: Where are students from (for example, city or countryside)? What are their parents’ vocations? What do they like to do in their spare time? Are they living far from home? Do they have part-time jobs? What do they plan to do after graduation? Did they like Vietnamese literature when they were in high school? With which themes do they most resonate?

Another issue is how students have been taught to interpret literature. While Vietnamese educational methodologies in this regard seem to be changing somewhat, I have found several recurring patterns, either in available textbooks or from student testimony regarding previous literature classes:

- **From overview to “proof-text.”** Students read an overview of an author’s life and thought, as well as a brief literary excerpt. A typical assignment is to show how the excerpt illustrates the overview.
- **Fill in the blanks.** Students are given a literary work and one or more main interpretive conclusions. They must then fill in the gaps, moving from the “raw” text to the approved or expert interpretation.
- **“Right” answers.** Rather than talk about the quality or credibility of an interpretation, Vietnamese students often want to know if it is “right” or not. The idea of interpretation as an ongoing, open-ended task does not sit well with them. When I tell my students that I learned something new about a story—despite reading it dozens of times before (and possibly even writing a graduate paper about it)—they look at me in disbelief. Each of these three patterns contains both opportunities and barriers to more Western ways of approaching literary interpretation.

I failed to take my audience into account for one memorable lesson on Robert Frost. Knowing that my students love nature poems, I had planned in a heavy dose of his New England lyrics, including many poems about winter. I arrived in class, ready to lead what I was sure would be a successful period on Frost’s poem, “Birches.” Yet this lesson sputtered—I had “forgotten” that my students had no personal experience with winter, snow, ice, or even birch trees. The images were so unfamiliar that while students could understand the meanings of the words in the poem, they could not picture the scene as a whole. Had multimedia resources been available, the gap might have been partly bridged, but as it was, on my way to the merciful conclusion of that lesson I saw all too many furrowed brows.

On the other hand, a poem such as “In Reference to My Children” by Anne Bradstreet worked well. Initially, I had my doubts due to the poem’s length and somewhat old-fashioned language (I had selected it as an example of colonial American writing). Despite the difficulties presented by its length and language, students loved reading and discussing this poem. Why? One reason: theme. The poem recounts Bradstreet’s great love in raising her children, and her hopes and dreams for their future. As I discovered, this is a powerful theme in
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Vietnamese culture. In fact, my Vietnamese students resonated with and responded to this poem more so than my previous American students!

Another approach that is likely to motivate your students is to show interest in and respect for Vietnamese literature. By putting yourself in the position of student, and your students in the position of teacher, they will be more motivated to learn and discuss literature in general—and you will learn much as well! When I teach Beowulf, I ask students to compare Beowulf with a hero from Vietnamese legend. That was my first introduction to Thach Sanh, Thanh Giong, and other names familiar to Vietnamese readers of this article.

Directions in Lesson Themes

In planning out specific lessons, it is usually beneficial to direct students' attention to one or two interpretive keys. How can you as the teacher identify and articulate these keys? Answering the following six questions will give you a head start on doing so:

(1) What is revealed in this work about the individual person? Literature can be about individual thoughts and feelings, or the process of personal growth and maturation. The novel David Copperfield by Charles Dickens provides a good example of this. (Any student who has ever tried to write a love poem will understand this dimension of literature!)

(2) What is revealed in this work about society? Literature can also be about social realities, significant historical events, or processes of cultural change. Rudyard Kipling's stories take place against a background of English colonialism, for instance. The novel Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe played a significant role in turning northern American sentiments against slavery.

(3) What is revealed in this work about universal human experience? Some themes do seem to transcend any one place, nation, or period in history. For example, readers around the world have responded to William Shakespeare's tragic love story, Romeo and Juliet.

(4) What truths does the work teach? Literature can and does teach truth, or part of a truth, or try to persuade us of a truth. These might be truths about ideas or philosophies, or about human experience. For example, Frederick Douglass's Narrative has something to say about the injustice of slavery.

(5) What beauty or pleasure does the work give? Literature, in both content and form, conveys pleasure and portrays beauty. When we read "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth, his descriptions of the host of daffodils communicate a feeling of pleasure, in the language used as well as through the picture created in our imaginations.

(6) What models for moral imitation does the work provide? Consciously or not, literature shapes moral character, providing examples either to imitate or to avoid. As students evaluate which are which, their interpretive discernment is sharpened. More than one of my students has wanted to imitate Benjamin Franklin's self-reliance, while admitting the dangers of extreme individualism.

Not every question can be answered for every work of literature on your syllabus, but at least one of them will yield a fruitful answer for classroom exploration. Since these questions are not exclusive, it is in fact more likely that you will find multiple answers to several of these questions for any given work of literature. With advanced students, ask them these questions and let them do the work!

Directions in Methodology

In this final section of my article, I want to give instructors a "grab bag" of potential teaching methods to use in a literature class (or in another class with a lesson using a literary text).

Pre-reading helps. Provide reading assistance to your students, such as glossaries explaining difficult expressions or archaic words. Dialect might also be glossed or even rewritten to help lower-level students. As a last resort, graded or simplified texts might be used, though...
in that case part of the “authentic nature” of a literary work is inevitably lost.

**Study questions.** Do not overwhelm students with too many or too detailed questions, but ask several study questions to help them focus on key issues in a reading. These questions could also become pre-class worksheets, start-of-class quizzes, or post-class journal entries.

**Post-reading helps.** Some creative options for answering students’ comprehension questions include: (a) Choose students to write questions on the blackboard, then poll the class for answers. (Asian students are often more comfortable writing than speaking their questions.) (b) A similar alternative is to have every student write a question on a slip of paper. The slips are then drawn out of a hat and answered in random order. For some reason, this has always led to a lively “game show” atmosphere in my classes! (c) More advanced students can work in “self-help” groups. Every student writes three questions, small groups of five or six students each are formed, and groups apply their collective brainpower to the questions of their members. At the end of the activity, each group can choose its “top three” difficult questions to submit to the teacher.

**Research.** Assign students to do research into biographical, historical, and cultural backgrounds. This will build the valuable skills of researching and note-taking, as well as cut down on class time given to mere transmission of information. If sufficient library resources are available, students might write an actual research paper.

**Oral presentations.** These might be on any topic, in any format. Since I was at a teachers’ college, I asked small groups to organize a one-period lesson plan on an assigned literary work, using what they were learning in their methodology class to teach our literature class.

**Discussion openers.** Ask thematic questions that bring a reading’s main ideas into students’ lives. For example, asking “What is the value of friendship to you?” or “What would be the price for you to betray a friend?” might be a good way to start a class on Shakespeare’s sonnet 29, “When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes.”

**Class journals.** These might be interpretive, asking short essay questions; or personal, asking for individual reactions; or a combination of the two. They might be double-entry journals (see *Teacher’s Edition* 2, March 2000, p. 44).

**Small groups.** Some activities or tasks that might be done in small groups include: answering study questions, competitive quizzing, discussing the six questions listed above, debating issues arising from a reading, predicting plot (for longer readings), and imagining what might happen after a story finishes. During lessons on Benjamin Franklin, I asked my students to debate the advantages and disadvantages of individualism, for instance. While discussing Anne Bradstreet, I asked students questions about parenting that required cross-cultural comparisons between the worlds of the poem and of their families.

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**Figure 1. Expert groups for stories.**

Part 1: Groups of five students each discuss a single narrative element. (One circle = one group.)

Part 2: Groups are shuffled, with each new group of five having an “expert” in one narrative element, to report the previous discussion results.
Expert groups. These might be done according to the basic elements of each literary genre. After reading a short story, you might organize small groups to discuss: plot, character, setting, style and point of view, and theme. After a set time, new groups are formed, with each group having one representative per literary element, who shares with the others about that element. In this way, everyone learns about every element, but individuals are only responsible to discuss and share about one of them. (See Figure 1 for a diagram of how this works.)

Creative or imitative writing. As students attempt to write a poem, short story, or personal essay of their own, they will dig deeper into how authors studied in class wrote. This is especially true for Asian students, who learn writing by imitating models to a much greater extent than Western students. One sample assignment might be to write, after reading Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” a poem about an encounter with nature.

Role-playing and dramatic performance. Students might recreate conversations, give advice to characters, or imagine themselves in a parallel situation. For instance, what would they do if they were in Stephen Crane’s “Open Boat” after the shipwreck? Students might also perform a scene from a play—my students threw themselves into staging selected scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, for example.

"Court of law." Students can set up a courtroom scene and “put on trial” a character from a novel or play for her actions. In passing “legal judgment,” they are drawing interpretive conclusions. One straightforward example is to put the slave masters in Douglass’s *Narrative* on trial, requiring students to examine the injustices of American slavery. A less clearcut example is from the story “The Silver Crown” by Bernard Malamud. In this story, a son asks a rabbi (Jewish religious teacher) for a miracle to heal his father, who is dying. The story becomes a classic faceoff between faith and reason. Without giving too much away, it is uncertain whether the rabbi in the story is honest, and of whether this matters or not. Take this issue to court, and let the jury (students) decide!

Oral interpretation. Teach students how to read in such a way that meanings are conveyed, using tones of voice, gestures, and body language. This might be done chorially. Vietnamese students memorize quickly, and this characteristic especially helps oral interpretation activities have a positive impact.

Literature in other forms. Be sure to look for other artistic works that might illuminate a reading assignment, such as a movie version of a play or novel, musical adaptations of poems, or paintings of scenes from great literature.

Student assessment. There are many grading (marking) alternatives to objective tests, including essay exams, class journals, and oral presentations. If possible, use these techniques throughout the course, rather than depending on a single final exam.

Self-assessment. After teaching, make immediate notes on your lesson plan about what worked or did not work and why. “Beg, borrow, and steal” good lesson ideas from other teachers or published sources. Initiate discussions with other teachers. Keep a class journal, perhaps agreeing to exchange journals periodically with another teacher who is doing the same. Ask other teachers to observe your lessons and offer their input.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to introduce some major issues and methods for teaching literature in Vietnam. It is my hope that you will improve on these starting points, making your literature class an enjoyable learning experience for everyone. Literature has the potential to be one of your students’ most memorable subjects, for literature has the power to engage, stimulate, and encourage their minds, hearts, wills, and imaginations.

If you are interested in further exploring literature in the EFL classroom, please refer to the following Resource Bulletin Board article, which reviews several resources in this field.

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Articles and teaching ideas welcomed! See page 3 for more information.