

**Reconstructing English Language Teaching  
in Taiwanese English Departments:  
An Interface between language and literature**

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**Abstract**

This paper argues for the use of literature for language teaching purposes. More important, it claims consistently that the use of literature for language teaching purposes can promote literary understanding and general linguistic awareness in college students. It first reviews some issues underlying the literary curriculum and literary pedagogy in colleges. In response to the problems identified, some suggestive accounts are made from broader theoretical perspectives for a pedagogic change. A “multi-directional approach” is then proposed for the teaching of literature. Following this model of language instruction, we have sought to provide a rationale for such an approach. The article may therefore be more theoretical and concerned with principles than classroom-oriented practice.

**Keywords:** language-based approaches, literature/language interface, process-oriented instruction

## **1. Introduction**

What many educators and language practitioners (Shot and Candlin, 1989; Carter and Long, 1991; Sihui, 1996) observe and describe about the dramatic decline in the interest of studying literature also holds true in the Taiwanese context. This fact can be traced in many ways. First, literature has not been given due consideration at many colleges and universities because many educational institutions have put their main emphases on practical language skills at the expense of literature.

Second, a lot of students nowadays seem to show a low level of enthusiasm for studying literature; some even feel threatened by it. This can be attributed partly to a lack of means whereby students can relate a piece of literary work to their own experience and so can extend that experience. Or to put it differently, it may be that too many reading experiences in teacher-centered classrooms fail to engage students, whose interpretative skills and analytic abilities remain underdeveloped within such a traditionally transmissive approach. The crucial point is that this underdevelopment prevents them from a continuous exposure to literary texts of a more serious nature.

Third, as a fundamental point stated previously, the conventional study of literature often means a receptive study of lexis, content or literary criticism rather than an imaginative collaboration between the reader and the author. Such reliance on the literary judgments of critics, scholars and teachers leads to a mere passivity in the learner. It is in this light that alternative pedagogies, unlike traditional literary study, should be sought to help learners to appreciate literary texts and increase their linguistic awareness, simultaneously.

## **2. Literary curriculum and the teaching of literature in Taiwanese colleges and universities: some observations**

For the moment, some ideas about the educational milieu, in particular association with the teaching of literature, must be expounded upon. Although this paper is not the proper forum to perform a thorough examination of the English language curriculum of higher education in Taiwan, we will describe briefly the special circumstances as it relates to the present study in order to emphasize some problems that have not received due attention. Many observations can be presented, of course, but we shall list what we deem as the principal ones:

*2.1 First, that there is a tendency to play down the relevance of literature in language curriculum.*

It is one of the tragedies of current English teaching that literature in many newly established “applied English departments” has begun to disappear gradually from the language classroom. Although it would be difficult to cite empirical evidence to substantiate this statement of generalization, it seems to be commonly agreed among language teachers that there has been in recent years a significant loss in the degree of confidence, in the scope and security of foundations in literature.

A very superficial survey of the nation-wide language curriculum will reveal that colleges have generally placed far more emphasis on training in the instrumental functions of the language than on training in the aesthetic understanding and appreciation of language. That is to say, English teaching across the school curriculum has revealed a commitment to a pedagogy in which students are instructed in the correct forms of the language.

As a result of this overriding focus on forms, a pedagogic concern for communicative proficiency has surfaced repeatedly in recent years, reflecting the current practice in Taiwan of more discussion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) than any other pedagogical methodology. Few would deny that CLT has assumed the status of orthodoxy in language teaching circles in Taiwan, receiving the sanction and support of leading university professors, publishers and voices from Ministry of Education as well.

Under the auspices of utilitarianism, literature is largely banished from the language classroom. There remains at present an enormously wide gap between the language class and the literature class, with the latter being taught as a specialized subject. This situation is in direct correlation with a rapid rise of departments of “Applied English” in Taiwan, where the English curriculum prioritises functional forms of the language for specific purposes.

Behind such a utilitarian concern of pedagogy is a widely held assumption that the study of literary English has little bearing on EFL learners’ needs to promote a functional command of English. Boyle (1986: 199) remarks well on the new awareness of this problem: “[t]his tendency is reinforced when English for Specific Purpose (ESP) becomes fashionable and the generalities of literature are considered less relevant to the students’ needs than the more purpose-specific language of other disciplines.” This degeneracy of literary study is also exemplified by many researchers and teachers (Moody, 1983; Littlewood, 1986; Boyle, 1986; Sihui, 1996). Sihui (1996: 169) expresses many literature teachers’ well-grounded anxieties about the diminution of literature classes in the university curriculum in Guangdong: “English Literature Course (a history of English literature and selected readings) for the fourth-year undergraduate students has been reduced to a one semester-course.” Needless to say, this is unfortunate.

A similar argument can be found also in Kifle's (1990: 4) study in which he relates the pedagogical issue to the Ethiopian context, indicating that even if literature is offered as an essential part of the curriculum at the undergraduate level, "it is taught by traditional methods where students are, in most cases, lectured to as passive participants, understanding little and rarely contributing to the teaching-learning process." Such a conventional practice, also ubiquitous in the Taiwanese school system, is the next issue upon which we wish to focus.

## *2.2 Second, that a teacher-centered, transmissive model of teaching dominates literature classroom.*

Characteristic of many literature classrooms in Taiwan is the preoccupation of traditional teacher-fronted instruction. It is by no means, however, the only existent approach. Yet, there is beyond doubt that the lecture, or the extended teacher-led presentation, has dominated literature teaching much longer and to a much greater extent than any single procedure or methodology employed in the classroom. For example, rather than help students to experience a play in all its textual richness, a teacher may succumb to the temptation to a neat outline of the Freytag Pyramid on the board. Likewise is the temptation to substitute history, mechanics or biography for genuine experience and appreciation of the work itself. According to Short and Candlin (1986:90), this can be attributed to the fact that non-native teachers of English have felt uneasy to provide "sophisticated response to minute details of language." In a similar vein, Elioglu (1992:19) professes that in Turkey, where English is also a foreign language:

Reading between the lines can become a painful process for the Turkish English-teacher, just as it is for the students, who is not equipped with the cultural insight to decipher the text.

As a result of this, literature teachers tend to retreat into "teaching *about* literature:" teaching historical/cultural background, literary movement, biography about authors, synopses of the works. In most classroom practice, knowledge *about* literature tends to replace the texts (Carter and Long, 1991; Faber, 1998). The relevant issue of presenting literature in a way that is directed towards a development of knowledge *about* literature rather than knowledge *of* literature is well argued by Carter and McRae (1996: xxi):

There is normally little concern with how to use knowledge to read literature for

oneself or to learn how to make ones' own meanings. Like the text itself, the meanings are, as it were, pre-given. They are stable and in place.

The outcome for students is that they learn to rely on outside authorities in the forms of teachers or critics rather than themselves.

There have been, without doubt, some brilliant and inspiring lectures that profit students considerably in this way. Generally, however, students in such teacher-led classrooms have scant opportunities to open and close conversation, exercise discourse skills, to express what they think or to experiment with the language itself. The lecture is a unidirectional process, which may be represented in the following figure:



Figure 1

A pre-packaged view of literary work, though presented with great enthusiasm, is likely to result in a mere information transfer (Long, 1986). Protherough (1986: 36) argues persuasively that passing over the ready-made interpretation “simply short-circuits the process by which the students develop their own response to the work.”

### *2.3 Third, that the teaching of literature has lacked a consistent methodology for presentation to EFL learners.*

Because traditions of the teacher-centered mode of presentation are culturally entrenched, there has been a dearth of innovative and varied approaches to teaching of literature in the classroom. To fully realize the potential of literature, Moody (1983: 18) maintains it is of particular importance “to ensure that teachers understand how to present literature (which may involve more than conventional teaching).” However, it is not uncommon to find situations in Taiwan where “the teacher translates passages and dictates notes in an examination-centered approach” (Littlewood, 1986:177). The difficulty with this position is that many students, who later become teachers of English, will develop a sense of uneasiness to teaching literary texts since the traditional “chalk and talk” forms of experiencing literature have a strong influence on their teaching practices. When called upon to teach literature in the classroom, most teachers will simply “hark back to how they themselves were taught” (Krahnke, 1987, quoted in van Lier, 1996:88).

Accordingly, special thought and reappraisal by university teachers is required to

find innovative ways of approaching literary works that many students nowadays instinctively perceive as remote, inaccessible or unattractive. In other words, the present climate encourages us to depart from traditional classroom routines and considers alternatives to teaching literature. Faber (1998:83) points out that “the secret of using literature in the foreign language classroom is to avoid traditional classroom teaching roles,” so that motivation can be stimulated and a literary text can come alive for readers. This corresponds quite closely with suggestions made in recent years by those who subscribe to constructing a pedagogy for language and literature teaching (Carter and McRae, 1996).

### **3 Changing the balance: some recommendations**

On the basis of a deep concern with the above situation, the following are some points to recommend the teaching of literature. This is by no means limited solely to a personal concern; these suggestions are built upon established concepts within the framework of what is known as literary stylistics and language awareness. Although these insights have been addressed previously elsewhere, we would like to review them within the context of EFL learning in Taiwan, helping the language teacher to turn into these problems an explorative and challenging process in the literature or language classroom.

Literary education, conducted by exposure to the content of the literary message mainly through lectures, may be in need of modification on a number of counts. It is best served by a list of points and issues for discussion.

#### *3.1 Literature and language teaching should be linked and integrated to be mutually reinforcing*

The noted gap between literature and language can be narrowed without making a drastic revision to the language curriculum (since it is unlikely to redirect the strand of the education systems). To do this, language and literature, which have long been regarded as two intractably exclusive subjects (Widdowson, 1975) in a Taiwanese EFL context, should be linked. No longer should literature be omitted entirely for practical concern, nor should it be taught entirely at an advanced level, creating the old-fashioned, anomalous situation where “students [study] more English literature than they [study] English language” (Carter and Long, 1987:1).

Although language and literature may appear to be distinct from the viewpoint of some teachers and curriculum designers, they do not, intrinsically, appear so. Simply put it, as we experience literature during reading, our perception of the literary

world is constructed through language. It has been argued very clearly that “students have to learn how to analyse language before they can respond subjectively to a text” (Brumfit and Carter, 1986:3). Perhaps a strong tie between language and literature is best illustrated by such an authority as Widdowson, who makes the claim that the teaching of literature should “draw a good deal from linguistics” (1975:1). Additionally, it is now recognized widely in language classrooms that students learn not only language per se, but they also *learn through language* (Derewianka, 1990; Carter and Nash, 1990; Hess, 2003). To cite just one example from many, Hess explains thus:

Entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce. When we read, understand, and interpret a poem we learn through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality. Through a poem, we can grapple with the problems of a parallel life (2003: 20).

In conjunction with much received opinion, Benton and Fox describe: “The writer shapes his images, via the use of words, into a text” (1985:5). Therefore, the first attempt [should be] to establish a pedagogic liaison between literature and language in classroom practice, for it will [then] be possible for students to make quite strong gains in the sorts of learning promoted by such integration.

To fulfil the objective of exploring some ways in which language and literature can be integrated, practitioners of both literature and language should help students to encounter genuine literary texts and assist students’ intimacy with the text. Such a view presupposes Carter’s (1995:9) argument that “language is patterned in highly interesting ways in literary texts so they are in a primary sense of fascinating sources for the study of literature.” This argument is, of course, shared by many other literary scholars, applied linguists and practitioners (Widdowson, 1975; Elkins, 1976; Grove, 1998; Abbs and Richardson, 1990). Seen thus, literature is indivisible from language and is a potentially useful aid to any language teacher.

If it is accepted that literature can be incorporated more extensively into the language classroom, then how is this best achieved in the classroom? This leads to the second point.

### *3.2 Language should be an essential foundation for understanding literature: the focus should be on texts.*

Taiwanese students have long studied literature separately but alongside the lan-

guage where this is relevant to appreciate the style, effects and techniques of written discourse. A “flight from the text” made by Short and Candlin (1989:178) is truly a remark germane to this circumstance. Blake (1983:9) reiterates this point, contending that “students of literature are often taught little or nothing about language and how it works.” This acute observation virtually lays bare the fact that little attention is placed on *how* language is involved in the construction of meaning. It is unlikely that the necessary foundation for appreciating literature can be established, as a consequence. Without such a preliminary basis, the student can only develop a relatively unconscious, implicit understanding of how language works. As a result, after learning and reading literature for years many students are still unable to provide or explain their responses with direct reference to features of the text.

It has become clear then that in a preliminary stage of studying literature the teacher should help learners to foster the ability to reflect, to construct ideas and to appreciate literature on the basis of their linguistic insights. In other words, focusing upon how language works “necessitates the ability to interact with the texts” (McKay, 1986:192). Such ability, it seems to us, is clearly what most teachers would want their students to develop. Most students need to be encouraged and guided to explore the language choices made in texts so that they can do it in such a way as to share their own enjoyment of the process.

### *3.3 The students should be made more sensitive to the processes involved in reading literary texts.*

For too long there has been a presumption in considerable number of literature classrooms that students naturally know how to read the texts placed in front of them. Certainly, teachers have taken care to ensure that the materials are usually manageable and accessible, but they have not often paused to think about some of the possible ways of making the texts engaging for the students. In the traditional literature classroom, where little attention had been paid to reading processes, few students gain the essential insights into the interplay of linguistic implications and literary interpretation.

As long as the students are still struggling with “meaning and vocabulary” (Blake, 1983:131), they are not developing an awareness of language. To do other than struggle with the content, Brumfit and Carter suggest that EFL students need to be made aware “*how* what is said is said and how meanings are made,” not merely to be fed more and more literature (1986:3). In agreement with Brumfit and Carter, McKay (1986:198) strikes a chord when she states, “if we wish to promote truly aesthetic reading, it is essential that literature be approached not efferently, but in a man-

ner which establishes a personal and aesthetic interaction between a reader and a text.”

For this reason, it will be argued that greater emphasis should be placed on the negotiable aspects of language in contrast to the conventional concerns with more content-based and stable relations between forms and meanings (see Widdowson, 1990, Chapter 7 for more details). It is our view that only when learners are taught explicitly to notice aspects of language at work and to consider why it has been employed in that manner, will they begin to make and remake relationships with the texts. This important point addresses the notion that students should become more confident and clearer in their capacity to know how language works, and how the subtleties and nuances of meanings are being conveyed through the author’s linguistic choices. This seems to be the strongest justification for the teaching of literature, for many Taiwanese students “have little sense of how to make the linguistic knowledge that they have accumulated” (Gray, 1994:132).

### *3.4 Learning and teaching should be process-oriented*

The process-oriented approach has become in recent years an important educational strategy in the language classroom (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999; Dörnyei, 2000; Bolhuis and Voeten, 2001). The main assumption underlying this approach is that learning is viewed as a multidimensional process: Firstly, the interest needs to be activated. Secondly, the interest generated has to be actively maintained and protected while the learning lasts. This runs parallel to what Sperber and Wilson (1986, cited in McRae 1991:54) have embraced, as “an act of ostensive communication (that) must attract the audience’s attention.” Finally, following the completion of a learning circle, there should be a retrospective self-evaluation of how things went. This means that a dynamic view of learning needs to be adopted to account for the changes and developments (e.g. attitudes, language awareness, strengths and weaknesses in skills required) over time in the context of classroom instruction.

However, process-oriented teaching occurs very little in regular lessons, because it can be inferred that many teachers have difficulties realizing this way of instruction (Bolhuis and Voeten, 2001). One very obvious obstacle is the difficulty involved in the assessment of learning results: it requires a move from simple paper-and-pencil tests to more complex forms of evaluation based on, for example, co-operative learning, portfolio, or think-aloud protocol. But it should be worth the effort in the long run, for as Carter and Long (1991:10) succinctly put it, “It is only through process-oriented teaching rather than through product-based or transmissive teaching that such goals of fuller interpretation can be reached.”

### 3.5 *The process of learning should be task-based, and learner-centered.*

Now that many literature classrooms in Taiwan are characterized by much chalk and talk, more discussion and interaction between students and teachers must be sought. However, literature teachers are being recommended here to go one stage further. While it is recognized that the teacher might need time for direct and explicit teaching, it does not mean that teachers adopt a didactic role. The class sessions should be made genuinely investigative and exploratory, with the possibility of more responses and think-aloud exercises to ensure that the students are properly engaged.

In this regard, the students are expected to engage the texts only by “doing” it (McCarthy and Carter, 1994: 178). This “learning by doing” reflects a strong argument in favour of the task-based approach as advocated by many researchers and practitioners such as Carter and Long (1991, 1987a), Nunan (1988, 1989), Willis (1996), and Carless (2002).

According to Willis (1996:18), one of the main benefits of task orientation is to “remove the teacher domination.” As the teacher moves away from center stage and devolves responsibility for learning, he/she becomes an *enabler*, who has “come down from the pedestal” to look around, walk around, address a group of students or explain instruction again when students are working on tasks during the lessons (Carter and Long, 1991:7).

To be worthwhile, tasks and activities have to encourage students to explore language use in real contexts, and allow them to reflect on their findings. This implies that students are called upon to play more active role in learning than is the case in traditional language teaching practice. Such means of enhancing learners to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in their language study is the general concept of learner-centeredness (Tudor, 1996).

That said, it is necessary to reiterate and recognize that there is more to literature than just the language. Many aspects pertaining to the study of literature (e.g. historical, cultural-biographical and literary traditions) have a part to play in understanding and interpreting more fully. And one cannot expect that the process-oriented and task-based approaches we advocate here can exist in isolation from more traditional lecture-format practices. As McRae states concisely (1991:53), “Language does not exist in a historical vacuum, but specific historically-based study of language and texts remain a specialized area of interest.”

## **4. A Varied Approach to literature**

To sum up partially what we have been proposing, we wish to present a diagram adapted from Long (1986:55) to illustrate a “multi-directional mode” of exploring literature in the EFL classroom.

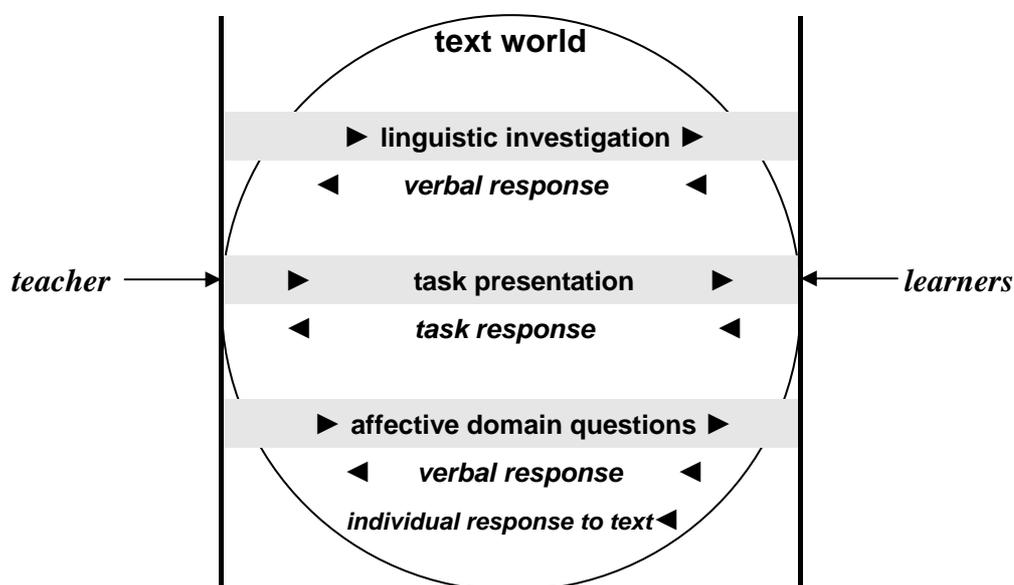


Figure 2

As the diagram shows, the input channels - (1) linguistic investigation, (2) task preparation, and (3) affective domain questions - running from the teacher are represented in the grey areas. As the first and second channels were dealt with in 2.2, where it is argued that the language should be an essential foundation for investigating literature and that the process of learning should be task-based, the third channel deserves further explanation.

While “linguistic investigation” channel involves learners in a cognitively investigative and analytic process, the third channel, as its name explicitly suggests, concerns the emotional aspect of learning. The teacher activates students’ learning by asking them questions that elicit students’ feelings and emotive responses towards the text or a particularly notable, illustrative passage. Students might sometimes like to suggest what feelings, memories or associations a text brings to mind for them. Even though the affective domain may not be used as often as the cognitive domain of linguistic investigation, it is indispensable in instruction - especially when we embark on a voyage into the realms of literature (Kissock and Iyortsuun, 1982).

Conversely, the learner channels of responses - (1) verbal response (based on linguistic investigation), (2) task response, (3) verbal response (based on affective domain questions), and (4) individual response - correspond and integrate with the teacher-input channels. Yet, there is an invisible response channel running from the

learner. The reason for this is that oftentimes a learner's response to the text, individually or internally, goes unmarked by the teacher. This explains why there is no indication of an arrow directing to the teacher in the above diagram. It is, as Long (1986:57) puts it, "the area where the learners, as a result of the stimuli they have received, begin to make their own value judgments of liking or disliking of a certain work."

## 5. Conclusion

In light of all these, the current situation in Taiwan seems, by and large, not very promising in this respect. And although there may exist an element of utopianism for those of us who have been teaching English as a foreign language, this multi-directional mode of teaching does indeed seek to open more opportunities for EFL learners to explore and interact with texts more dynamically as contrasted to the passive, one-way process lecture, as illustrated in figure 2.

In this study, we have attempted some justification for the adoption of literary texts, with suggestions about the accesses where texts can be mobilized, presented, and studied in the language classroom. In sum, the skills to be developed by the study of literature are not just for reading per se; the development of learners' enhanced consciousness and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language has also strongly advocated. Further, attitudes to language and delight in studying literature can change as a result of a more holistic method highlighting language features by cognitively and affectively involving the learners.

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