

Literature as Resource in Foreign Language Teaching

Literature-based Activities in Spanish Classes

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Abstract. This paper explores the reasons for the use of literature for language teaching and discusses the concepts of difficulty, relevance, and methodological resources. The present work describes classes in which the main language topic was demonstrated with group activities based on literary texts.

本研究は、言語教授に向けた文学の使用の有効性を検証し、その難しさ、妥当性や方法論について論ずる。本論は、文学作品に基づいて行ったグループ活動により主たる言語トピックが示された授業の事例をいくつか紹介する。

Introduction

This article is part of a project¹ concerning the use of literature in Spanish language classes, where Spanish was the students' second or third language. Literature in the language class is mostly used with intermediate level and above students. Even so, the object of this research is the use of literary texts at the beginning level for a) language learning support. (By using real literary texts students will get extra practice of Spanish. As much as possible, the chosen literary texts should have some relation to language topics.), and b) encouraging students to approach "real" literature (i.e., introducing students to the

literary world of the foreign language they are learning in order to get a new and richer perspective of the Spanish speaking world).

The structure of this article is the following : 1) Exploration of some of the main issues and concerns relevant to using literature in foreign language classes (reasons for using literature, material selection, level of difficulty, etc.), 2) Description of activities done with four literary texts and student opinions regarding the activities, 3) Evaluation, and 4) Conclusions.

"What use is this intangible power we call literature ?" (Eco, 2006 : p.2)

1. Literature and language teaching

The present research is too brief to give a definitive answer to Eco's question, so instead it will focus on the use of literature not as content but as a methodological resource for learning Spanish, because one powerful element of literature is that it provides examples of language "in use" (Hill, 1989 : p.11).

"Using literature as a linguistic resource involves starting from the fact that literature is language in

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use and can therefore be exploited for language-learning purposes” (Carter and McRae, 1996 : xx).

There are two main reasons for the use of literature in the language class:

a) The possibility of observing language in use and reinforcing points previously learned within a genuine language context. Hill (1989 : p.8) maintains that “The structures and vocabulary will subconsciously register and concepts already known will be reinforced by their discovery in a different context.” Therefore, students can become aware of wider areas covered by a word and of the different meaning of the words with which it can be associated. Moreover, literature in the language classroom provides students with a rich context to learn and practice the new language. Teaching language by means of setting isolated sentences to illustrate particular language points might be a good system for memorization but prevents the learners from doing analysis and discovering meanings on the basis of context. A literary text can furnish learners with an interesting and meaningful context to work from and to which they can relate what they learn.

b) Introducing students to the literary world of the foreign language they are studying helps to create the conditions under which it can be learned and this brings us to the question of motivation. Literature provides a genuine context for language learning not only because it shows language in use but also, and probably especially, because it engages learners’ emotions and awakens curiosity. Sometimes it is difficult to get learners at any level interested in grammatical details and remember them to produce accurate utterances. For example, students find it difficult to differentiate ¿Qué hora es ? (What time is it ?) from ¿A qué hora es la clase de español ? (What time is the

Spanish class ?) and forget to produce the preposition “a” when they ask for a particular time or use the preposition wrongly when they ask for the time. Hill (1989 : p.9) maintains that “Sometimes students need the added stimulus of an exciting story.” Therefore, in order to illustrate the lesson ¿Qué hora es ? (What time is it ?) the teacher chose the poem “La cogida y la muerte” (At Five in the Afternoon) by Federico García Lorca. Naturally, the language of literary works is not typical of daily life usage and we would not like our students to reply “It was five in the shade of the afternoon” when they are asked for the time. The positive side is that literary works provide a very rich context that shows lexical and syntactical items in use and thus makes them more memorable because such a context might arouse curiosity: several students commented that they wanted to know what had happened at five in the afternoon. Therefore, literary texts not only provide further practice in grammar and vocabulary but also open the door of the Spanish literary world.

Regarding the use of literary texts in the Spanish class, the following three issues are worth mentioning: level of difficulty, relevancy of the literary texts used in class, and literary texts as a methodological resource.

Difficulty. Apart from the obvious cultural difficulty (references to cultural aspects) we have to consider the questions of stylistic register, word identification, and grammatical complexity. It is necessary to avoid conceptual difficulty because some texts may be deceptively simple but the ideas they convey may be too complex. To avoid having students spend too much time with a great deal of difficult and unknown words, it is advisable to select texts (stories, passages or poems) translated into the students’ mother tongue.

Relevance. The texts and passages are selected considering the language topics that learners are studying. In that way, they can observe and practice with authentic material the grammatical themes under study in the class.

Literary texts used as a methodological resource.

As has been mentioned, the positive and primary reason to use literature is to provide language study with a genuine context. Thus, literary texts become the support of activities for reviewing grammatical and lexical points. From this perspective we can offer a simple example: students can practice the simple past tense with a group of isolated sentences (a mechanical drill) or with a group of sentences taken from a story or a poem. The first case offers an empty frame, and the second one offers a world with mystery, characters, plot, and emotions.

2. Group-work activities

When designing activities, it is necessary to keep a balance between simple and clear assignments that guide students to concentrate on the text and also challenging aspects that lead learners out of the text to discover things for themselves. At the beginners' level it is not possible to design activities for discussion, so the tasks should focus on the topics

under study. The tasks should be challenging but simple, focus on grammatical aspects, and follow the principle of "learning by doing". This part of the work describes how three groups of students worked with four literary texts in 2009.

2.1. The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths by Jorge Luis Borges.

First year Economics and Law students (N=31) read the story *The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths* and did the following activities in the two classes described below. At the time of these activities the students had already studied Lesson 2 (introduction of noun gender) and Lesson 3 (gender and number of nouns).

- a) Learners replied to seven questions related to the story: location, characters, and a very brief biography of the author.
- b) Three activities related to nouns (Fig.1) : 1) learners are provided three nouns and they search for other nouns related to these three within the story, 2) learners are provided six nouns and they have to search for nouns related to them out of the story, 3) learners recognize in the story feminine and masculine nouns, singular and plural.

Table 1 . Work with literary texts in classes of Spanish as a second foreign language

| Lesson | Year | Literary text | Language point |
|--|---------------|---|---|
| Lesson 2 ¿Cuál es tu número de teléfono móvil ? What is your cell phone number ? Lesson 3. ¿Cuántos años tienes ? (How old are you ?) | 1 N=31 | 2. 1. <i>Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos</i> (story) The two kings and the two labyrinths (Jorge Luis Borges) | Nouns : gender and number |
| Lesson 10 ¿Cómo es tu mejor amigo ? What is your best friend like ? | 1 N=31 | 2. 2. <i>Platero y yo</i> (first chapter of the book) Platero and I Juan Ramón Jiménez | Adjectives |
| Lesson 4 Biografías Biographies | 2 N=30 | 2. 3. <i>La cogida y la muerte</i> (poem) At five in the afternoon (Federico García Lorca) | Simple past tense |
| Lesson 9 ¿Qué hora es ? ¿A qué hora ? What time is it ? At what time ... ? | 1 N=70 | 2. 4. <i>La cogida y la muerte</i> (poem) At five in the afternoon (Federico García Lorca) | Nouns, adjectives, articles : gender and number agreement |

8) 関係がある単語 (ストーリーの中に):

Alá: Días magos omnipotente
 hambre: sed
 laberinto: escaleras puertas garcía muro

9) 関係がある単語(ストーリー以外)

puerta Ventana (窓) llave (鍵) cerradura (錠)
 camello caballo (馬) desierto (砂漠) oasis (オアシス)
 tiempo reloj (時計) posada (宿屋) futuro (未来)
 desierto arena (砂) roca (岩) castor (オオムシ)
 arquitectos construcción (建築) edificio (建物) iglesia (教会)
 magos magia (魔法) templo (神殿) oración (祈り)

| 10) | 単数の名詞 女 | 複数の名詞 女 | 単数の名詞 男 | 複数の名詞 男 |
|-----|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | confusion | puertas | escandalo | hombres |
| | maravilia | | ala | magos |
| | puerta | | | |

Figure 1 . Three activities related to nouns

c) Results in terms of students' impressions: "a very interesting activity since we did not know anything about Borges," "it is interesting to look for nouns within the story and look for their synonyms inside and outside the story," "not only language and grammar but also literature of the Spanish speaking countries is interesting," "a bit difficult," "group activities are important," "I want to carry out more activities like this one."

2.2 . Platero y yo by Juan Ramón Jiménez

First year Economics and Law students (N=31) read the first chapter of *Platero and I* and did the activities described below in two classes. At the time learners carried out these activities, they were studying Lesson 10 in which the main topic is the use of adjectives to describe physical appearance and personality.

a) After reading the text, learners did six activities. Activity number 1 is related to the description of the main character of the book, Platero, a donkey (Figure 2) ; in activity

number 2 learners had to find out all the colors in the text and indicate the colors corresponding to several nouns taken from the text; in activity number 3 learners looked for all the adjectives in the text and indicated their antonyms (Figure 3). In activities 4, 5 and 6 students looked for words related to the nouns "body," "sound," and "taste" respectively.

b) Listening included two activities with a video. In the first activity, learners, divided into groups of three, searched the text and made three lists: one list with verbs, one with nouns, and one with adjectives. Then, learners referred to those lists to carry out a gap-filling activity. In the second activity, learners received the story in strips and they reconstructed it while watching the video.

c) Results in terms of students' impressions: "we received a piece of information about the Spanish culture," "the story is interesting," "listening tasks were difficult," "search for the Spanish unknown words in the Japanese version was very hard but interesting," "this kind of class is like a seminar," "this class with a story

1. Contenido

- 1.1. ¿Qué animal es Platero? (asno)
Platero es un burro asno.
- 1.2. ¿De qué color es?
El es plata. (gris)
- 1.3. ¿De qué color son sus ojos?
Sus ojos son negros.
- 1.4. ¿Qué le gusta comer a Platero?
A Platero gusta comer naranjas, mandarinas, los uros mascateles.
- 1.5. ¿Cómo es Platero?
Platero es pequeña, peludo, suave, tierno y mimoso.

Figure 2. Activity related to the description of a donkey, the main character of the book *Platero and I*

| 3. Adjetivos | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| 形容詞 | 反意語 | 形容詞 | 反意語 |
| pequeño | grande | negro | blanco |
| blando <small>柔らかい</small> | duro | peludo | calvo |
| fuerte <small>強い</small> | debil | suave <small>やさしい</small> | solido |
| seco <small>乾いた</small> | humedo | igual <small>等しい</small> | diferente |
| alegre <small>元気</small> | triste <small>悲しい</small> | ideal | real |

Figure 3. Activity with adjectives taken from the first chapter of the book *Platero and I*

included a very good revision of grammar, vocabulary and verb conjugation.”

2.3. *At Five in the Afternoon* by Federico García Lorca

Second year Humanities students (N=30) worked with the poem *At Five in the Afternoon* to practice the simple past tense (Spanish tense: pretérito indefinido de indicativo) and did the following activities in three classes:

a) Gap-filling task. Students reviewed several verbs necessary to write a biography and inserted them in the biography of Federico García Lorca. They read the poem *At Five in the Afternoon* in Japanese (the teacher and the teacher assistant read it in Spanish).

b) Learners watched 20 minutes of the video “Death in Granada” about the assassination of García Lorca and discovered the cultural and historical meaning of the time “five in the afternoon.” Regarding vocabulary, learners did an activity where they had to search in the poem for words related to death, bullfight, noise, the human body, and animals (Figure 4). Finally, learners made a summary of the theme of the poem (Figure 5).

c) Learners looked for examples of simple past tense verbs in the poem, wrote them in the infinitive, and re-wrote the sentence in the simple present tense (in Spanish: presente de indicativo, Figure 6). The last activity with *At Five in the Afternoon* was a listening task.

6. Busca en el poema (詩) ^{単語} palabras que tengan relación con:
- “muerte”..... ataúd, desolada, silencio, agonía, gangrena
- “^{闘牛} corrida de toros”..... asta, plaza, mugía
- “^{騒音} ruido”..... las sonas de bordón, suenan, campana
- “cuerpo humano”..... muslo, frente oído
- “animales”..... toro, leopardo, paloma

Figure 4. Activity related to vocabulary

Tema

La poesía describe la muerte, las heridas y la guerra.
この詩は死、傷、戦争を表しています。

* Garcia Lorca escribió este poema para lamentar las muertes en la Guerra Civil española.

Figure 5. Summary of the theme of the poem written by two students

- 7.) Busca en el poema cinco verbos en pasado, escribe el infinitivo y una oración (del poema) en pasado y presente

| Verbo 動詞 | Infinitivo 原形 | Oración 文 |
|------------|---------------|--|
| trajo | traer | Un niño trajo la blanca sábana Un niño trae la blanca sábana |
| se llevó | llevarse | El viento se llevó los algodones El viento se lleva los algodones |
| sembró | sembrar | Y el óxido sembró cristal y níquel Y el óxido sembra cristal y níquel |
| se cubrió | cubrirse | cuando la plaza se cubrió de yodo cuando la plaza se cubri de yodo |
| puso | poner | la muerte puso huevos en la herida la muerte pone huevos en la herida |
| comenzaron | comenzar | Comenzaron los sonos de bordón Comienzan los sonos de bordón |

Figure 6. Activity with examples of simple past tense in the poem

d) Results in terms of students' impressions: "we investigated many new words thus enlarged our vocabulary," "we learned many words related to bull-fight and human body, and also simple past tense," "working with the author's biography allowed us further practice of simple past tense,"

"group activities let us understand the whole because each member of the group," "we studied an important aspect of the Spanish history."

2.4. *At Five in the Afternoon* by Federico García Lorca

Economics and Law first year students (N=31) and Engineering first year students (N=39) worked with the poem *At Five in the Afternoon* to see the use of “at + time” (a las…) and practice noun-adjective agreement and article-noun agreement, and did the activities described below in two classes. At the time learners worked with this poem they had finished studying Lesson 9 and had learned to ask for the time and to express at what time they do certain daily things (get up, go to school, etc.).

- a. Students read the poem *At Five in the Afternoon* in Japanese, watched 20 minutes of the video “Death in Granada”, understood the cultural and historical meaning of the time “five in the afternoon”, and accomplished several activities with noun-adjective agreement, antonyms, related

words, and noun-article agreement. (Fig. 7)

- b. Listening task based on the poem.
- c. Results in terms of students’ impressions. The four main comments were: “we investigated many new words,” “we studied an important aspect of the Spanish culture,” “the poem and the activities were not easy but group work proved to be fruitful,” “the repetition of “at five in the afternoon” with such a deep meaning is impressive.”

3. Evaluation

Regarding the learning that took place, so far only four activities have been carried out and no evaluation parameters have yet been set. However, Durant (1996 : pp.65-88) maintains that an activity has functioned effectively when the following opportunities have been presented:

2. “blanca sábana”. Hacer ejemplos sustantivo – adjetivo

asta desolada
ingles verdes
pizza buena

3. Escribir el opuesto (反意語)

| | | | |
|----------|-----------|--------|-------|
| muerte | vida | sombra | luz |
| terrible | agradable | lejos | cerca |
| silencio | ruido | arriba | abajo |

4. Escribe palabras relacionadas (関係がある単語)

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| de la tarde | de la mañana | de la noche | medianoche |
| viento | tifón (台風) | tormenta (嵐) | aire |
| corazón | pulmón (肺) | cerebro (脳) | sentimiento (感情) |

5. Indica el artículo (冠詞)

| | | | |
|---------|---------|-----------|------------|
| el niño | la niña | el nieve | el ataúd |
| el toro | la vaca | la muerte | el corazón |

Figure 7. Activities with noun-adjective agreement, antonyms, related words, and noun-article agreement based on the poem *At Five in the Afternoon*

- a) Students have read a new passage.
- b) Students have been involved in close reading in their language and have made efforts to observe and investigate the text in the target language. Students observed how grammar rules (for example, noun-article agreement) work in the language and how past tense is used in a real text.
- c) The activities and the text were challenging, i.e., the level of difficulty activated interpretation skills but did not hinder learners from carrying out the task.
- d) There was collaborative group work. Students commented that although some activities were difficult it was possible to do them due to the contributions of all group members.

Regarding the use of literary texts, it is difficult to find suitable texts, i.e., appropriate to the level of the students in the initial stages and it is almost impossible to find a text adapted to the grammatical knowledge of beginners. We do not want learners to spend hours looking for all the unknown words and trying to make sense of literary sentences with a great deal of language subtleties. However, there is no reason why beginners should be forever restricted to the language of daily communication. The solution proposed for beginners' work with literary texts is the use of texts which have a Japanese translation. The length of the text should be appropriate for reading in class and suitable for several learner centered activities. The text should relate to the syllabus; i.e., when choosing the literary material we should consider the topics that learners are studying. Besides this, it is advisable to consider texts that can be supported by extra material, mainly visual aids. Naturally, the author of this work wants students to understand and enjoy the material as completely as possible.

Regarding activities, the listening tasks were considered particularly difficult by a great deal of students. Therefore, it is necessary to consider ways to simplify them, so as to prevent learners from

having a feeling of non-achievement. The completed activities were designed for grammar practice, listening, reading the Japanese version, and searching the Spanish original text. An effort should be made to try activities suitable for improving students' speaking skills. An optimum combination of the material selected and well- designed activities might be the answer to that effort. Moreover, it is necessary to make a detailed analysis of all the students' impressions of the completed activities and consider them to design the future activities with literary texts.

4. Conclusions

This article is the first step of a project that consists of tasks for working with literary texts in a Spanish class at the beginner level. The author of the present work wishes to devise ways of making literature a more significant part of language teaching for beginners and using it in such a way as to improve the learners' mastery in the four basic areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

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