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**Reading, Literature, Education: Possible  
Encounters in the English as a Foreign  
Language Class**

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**Reading, Literature, Education:  
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**Abstract**

The position of English as the closest possible to that of *lingua franca* is unquestionable. Yet, the quality of knowledge offered in Brazilian schools, regarding English as a Foreign Language – EFL –, is usually considered below acceptable standards, so it is felt as of secondary importance, and those who can afford it go to private courses. This situation is also added to the rejection of the foreigner, the different, narrowing possibilities of observing new views of the world and of the *other*. As an alternative, a Literary Reading class, henceforth LR, is proposed as an approach in the EFL class, though not excluding other competences. It basically consists of reading and discussing fiction texts in English in part of the course time. This paper summarizes a research where LR classes were tested as a possibility of optimizing deeper readings and fostering pedagogical value to that class, while offering ample possibilities of development of linguistic skills. The work encompasses a theoretical section which briefly discusses theories on reading, literature and manners of reading which encourage readers to construct meaning to the text. Then it brings samples of a six-month action-research, of qualitative approach, conducted in an EFL course in a Brazilian town in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The *corpus* of the work were diaries written by the teacher and the students, plus a video-recorded conversation with the whole group at the end of the project. The results indicate that LR provides a democratic space of discussion and reflection which can add value to the teaching-learning process, and may shorten the distance, while improving quality, between what is offered in state and in private educational institutions.

**Keywords:** English as Foreign Language; reading approach; literary reading.

## Introduction

Most teachers will feel the strangeness of the paradoxical attitude of students who, though wishing to learn the foreign language (FL), resist it, perhaps unconsciously. Part of the explanation for such behavior may be found in studies of identity, since the FL represents the colonizer, the power against which nothing can be done, or better, one can choose not to speak its language. This attitude would be one possible way of resistance, hindering *teachlearning* (Freire, 2011).

In addition, public educational institutions usually give different treatment to the FL. Besides the reduced workload, students must achieve a minimum score to pass to the next stage in Mathematics or History, for example, but their marks in FL do not count to that effect. Failing students on their marks is something to be discussed, since what one has not learned at a certain point can be successfully resumed later. Moreover, it is an advantage the possibility of trying the most with students, free from the fear of making them repeat a whole school year. But if marks are the schools' value, and they are not considered in FL, this subject is likely to be undervalued.

It is undeniable that students ought to master contents, but the main reason for focusing on exercises and rules memorization is testing, which should serve as evidence of learning, but becomes focus of the process.

In face of this scenario, it is important to emphasize our belief in the value of FL's in educational institutions, and we take side with Abbot (1984), who believes that even if results are bad, students' attitudes may change for the better with some approach to FL and culture, and this is not of minor importance.

Teaching a FL is clearly justifiable, for representing an open door in the labor market, introducing different cultures, expanding one's horizon, providing the possibility of reflecting on issues of one's life and culture outside one's language, where words can already be so laden with ideologies that it is difficult to see from new angles. The possibilities of fostering such values must be optimized. FL's learning must be brought closer to the learners, connected to their lives and reality.

## Reading

The *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* [National Curriculum Parameters] (PCN, 1996) — provide that the inclusion of an area in the curriculum should be determined by the role it plays in society. In countries like Brazil, where only a small portion of the population actually uses foreign languages for oral communication, to consider developing oral skills as the main goal does not take into account the criterion of social relevance. The only formal examinations in a foreign language, the entrance examinations to universities and the admission to post-graduate studies, require reading skills proficiency. The PCN also recognize that learning to read in a foreign language can promote an overall development of students' literacy.

Paiva (2000) claims properly that it would be a mistake to set a path due to existing problems, *ie*, to use reading because public schools are still ill-equipped. Distortions should be corrected, with a serious policy to improve education. Nevertheless, what a successful professional mainly needs, as well as higher education students, is to read in FL (English being usually the case) to expand their access to the state of art in their specific area.

However, it is clear that more and more people need to speak English, or other FL, in their work at multinational firms, hotels, restaurants, taxis or aircrafts; athletes who leave the country also need knowledge of the FL, as do committees that receive foreign groups, plus a myriad of workers in different situations. Besides, one cannot teach / learn just one skill of a language. The separation — oral practice, reading, aural comprehension and writing is a way of putting the emphasis here or there; but language is not a point in a tissue, it is the tissue formed with diverse points.

So what is suggested does not preclude attention to other skills, but is a way to work reading, certainly valuable in an educational project, as education implies transformation. Content is important, but one must go beyond it. Students should develop their autonomy, seeking what they need to know. It is necessary that the class presents more democratic paths, enabling students to listen to different discourses, while making their own known.

It is also important to optimize students' encounters with the Arts. Aesthetic enjoyment should not be reserved for an elite; it is the result of persistent work, done with emotion and sensitivity, favoring students' meetings with the object in such a way that this meeting is an event in the sense of something different from what has been experienced (WHITEHEAD, *apud* ISER, 1999). Teachers need to be better prepared for this role.

In a reading class, it is perfectly possible to develop other skills. Systematic reading optimizes vocabulary acquisition, whose importance for oral communication is obvious. There will be ample listening opportunities — the teacher's voice, recordings and the students' voices. Besides, certain texts have rhythm, rhyme and sound qualities that facilitate memorization. Finally, the connection reading / writing seems obvious. Those who read systematically usually write well and develop sensitivity to the language norms.

### *Reading and the Literary Text*

This paper proposes using literary texts in EFL classes for the possibilities noted of, along with learning English, enabling critical development and benefits beyond linguistic boundaries.

It is known that literature can cause both conformity and subversion. This is why Plato did not want poets in his republic. Eagleton (2001) considers that, if we allow young people to spend a few years just reading books and talking, they will possibly question not only the values transmitted to them, but the authority behind this transmission, and this questioning is part of higher education (*ibid*, p. 276).

Britton (1982) points out that when one reads poetry, the raw material of one's experience is reshaped, increasing the possibility of understanding that much of what is believed to be natural is cultural. Since the values of our

hegemonic culture prevent us from imagining different values and ways, literature may facilitate an open-minded attitude. Moreover, literature offers a space for observing what happens in real life, as do children's "make-believe" games. Britton (*op. cit.*) states: "Whenever we play the role of spectator of human affairs I suggest we are in the position of literature" (p. 154). Harding (1937, *apud* Britton, *op. cit.*) had already identified the role of observer (onlooker). Literature, offering readers the possibility of being spectators of life and human dilemmas, can be more formative than events in which one is participating, thus providing a space of rehearsal for real life.

Britton (*op. cit.*) theorizes that we have an area that corresponds to our deepest needs; there is another which deals with the outside world, the shared experience, and finally, a third area, which serves to relate the other two. He calls this one "play", because of its playful nature. The more relations between the innermost and outermost areas happen in the "play" area, to which literature belongs, the better it fulfills its assimilative function. Thus there is a connection between art, literature, harmony and well-being. To provide this benefit in an EFL class is no small thing.

The word of Umberto Eco, who considers a special function of literature to educate to fate and death (2003, p. 21), finishes this section. The great human dilemma is the conflict between the desire to live and the acceptance of death. While the claims of science have expiration dates, you cannot change the end of Anna Karenina or Snow White. Being a value that accumulates, the fiction text trains for the inevitable. (Fonseca, 2009, p. 30)

It is not the scope of this work to define literature, but to present ways of literary reading (LR). Eagleton (2001) suggests that the focus should be *the practices used when dealing with these discourses*, for they have the power to transform them. (*op. cit.* pp. 281/282, emphasis added, *apud* Fonseca, 2003, p. 26)

#### *The Reader as Constructor of the Text Meaning*

Literary studies have traditionally turned to the author's message and the text's meaning. Wolfgang Iser (1999) sees the change of this paradigm as necessary if literature is to play an important role in education. Thus, the focus of investigation should be *the effect* the text produces in the reader, or how the reader *receives* it. For this to happen, the text should be an event, going beyond any known reference systems (Whitehead, *apud* Iser, 1999). Also, it should be noted how free the reader is to interpret the text, and finally, the text's relation with the context of its production and with the reaction it provokes in the readers.

In the LR here proposed, it is important that the reader receives the text as an event, and what the text does and means in its reception. As for the presence of ideologies in the text, they come within the author's intention; but the intentionality that existed in creating the text may have lost color at its reception. In this respect the teacher can and should help students to question the text, developing a critical attitude and assuming the role of subject of their reading.

As for limits of interpretation, they will be determined by the group, following Fish (1998), who claims that the text, formed by the written and the unwritten, presents gaps. Readers, compelled to make sense of these spaces of negativity, place themselves in an external position so as to better observe the scenario. Thus the communicative function of literature happens, enabling the reader to examine life situations from a vantage point, since otherwise he would be totally enmeshed in the problem. So there is not a single meaning for a text, and different readings will emerge depending on reader, text, time and place, allowing the text to make sense in different socio-historic contexts.

The authority in the LR classroom would depend on the existence of a certain center of meanings, and we believe in context. However, the group's shared knowledge will guide the possibilities of interpretation, offering a parameter so that a consensus can be reached, preventing total relativism which would hinder understanding.

The links between reading, literature and pedagogical practices that favor the development of autonomy and critical awareness are clear, which calls for Freire (2001), who insists that teaching is not imparting knowledge, but encouraging possibilities for knowledge to be created; besides, the possibility of acquiring knowledge of real value will be greater the more critically it is exercised, as this will lead to the development of epistemological curiosity, central to learning (Freire, *op. cit.* p. 27).

Very important in Freire's theory is the belief that however difficult change may seem, it is possible (*ibid.*, p. 85). Good thinking is dialogic, knowing that we are not definitely certain of our certainties (*op. cit.*, p. 30). We can intervene in the text; we can intervene in the world. The world changes; we can change.

Human relations are practiced at school. One must learn to listen, even if completely disagreeing with what is being said; likewise, it takes courage to disagree, even against the majority, and eventually accept a group decision, since the social must take precedence over the individual. This is how social groups are organized. These attitudes are central in the class proposed here.

### **Literary Reading Class**

A LR class does not have an exact recipe, and will change according to the context of many variables, the teacher making necessary adjustments. Beginners can participate, using dictionaries or glossaries. They can also have the text translated, total or partly. The work can be done individually or in groups.

There is no precise definition of literature; so, the difference of the present proposal is the literary way of reading; a song, a poem or even an ad can be used. The literary canon, however, has its value assured over time and space, and is strongly recommended.

Teacher and students select themes, and the teacher selects texts accordingly. These are read, first individually and quietly, then aloud. Students should volunteer for this task, otherwise the teacher can do it. At this point, it is

not advisable to interrupt a student's reading to correct pronunciation, for example. The teacher might take note of errors and correct them later. Then, there is the negotiation of meaning, in pairs or small groups, following Lopes (2001) who, among others, believes interaction promotes learning. Finally, there is a general discussion, either in English or in Portuguese; once this is a reading activity, speaking being not the main goal, using Portuguese is fully justified at this point.

Other skills are integrated in the proposed class: there will be opportunity to practice grammar, pronunciation and listening. In fact, everything is integrated. It is, rather, to set the focus on reading, whose lack of proficiency is known to be the greatest impediment to students' learning.

## **THE Research**

After confirming the absence of the literary text in EFL classes, through an investigation of books used in most English courses and schools, an action-research was conducted in an EFL private school in Barra Mansa, RJ, Brazil, with the teacher in the role of teacher-researcher, because, as Freire states, "I search to find, finding, I intervene, intervening I educate and educate myself" (*op. cit.* p. 232).

The research was of qualitative approach, since the investigated constructs cannot be generalized, but can be taken as examples, not least because everything one believes to be individual can be found in others (Demo, 2001).

The subjects were students of intermediate level, having studied English for 4 years, on average, and with ages from fifteen to thirty-five years, a typical situation of private EFL courses. The teacher-researcher had been teaching this group for about a year.

15 literary texts were chosen, of themes decided by the group: death, love, science fiction and the politically correct language. Two texts from a magazine were inserted, aiming to raise awareness of literary features. The project consisted of 16 classes of 90 minutes each, corresponding to 50% of the classes of a semester; thus, it was integrated in the course syllabus.

Copied texts were provided to the students, who read them individually, then in pairs. A number of dictionaries was made available, as well as glossaries. The teacher would help when students asked for it. Finally, the open discussions started, and participation was encouraged. The variation in the procedure referred to reading the whole text or a section, discussing only at the end or along the reading. There was no testing.

The last ten minutes of each class were reserved for the individual writing of diaries. All students and the teacher had a notebook for it, which was kept in the classroom. Students were asked to relate what had happened, their impressions and evaluation. The diaries were not examined before the first month, to avoid the risk of hasty changes, resulting from premature conclusions (Nunan, 1992). The teacher's diary was read only after the end of the project.



Finally there was a videotaped conversation, thus achieving "the use of two or more views of the same thing, so that different data sources can be used to support, develop and bring light to the research in question" (Cohen and Manion, 1990, p. 233).

However, in a qualitative research there are no absolute criteria for validity, the maximum requirement being that, at some stage, there is some consensus about the truth of what was noted and then reported (Smith, 1984, *apud* Lüdke and André, 2001).

The *corpus* was examined keeping in mind the guiding questions of this work: has the proposal favored deepening readings, linking the class to the outside world? Has it favored transformations such as changes in attitude, autonomy and critical awareness? Was the proposal approved by the research subjects?

The most frequent themes and recurring aspects noted defined the categories in which the data were grouped (Lüdke and André, 2001, p. 43):

- Category 1: insights in reading: connection to the world "out there."
- Category 2: recognized transformations, in knowledge and subjects.
- Category 3: approval of the proposal: literary reading in EFL classes.

The few records that were not felt to fit were highlighted as category zero. There follows an outline of the videotaped final conversation. The analysis and comments are in italics, as well as words in Portuguese felt to be very local; however, their meaning in the context is clear enough, and explained. The translation aimed to be faithful to the records, though the texts were reduced for their length.

#### *Final Conversation*

Participants: students: G, M, R, Rf, Rô, T, Z and teacher: P.

R – I'll start, I, when this, when you started the project with us, everybody, *né*, was *cru*, I was much more (*crua*) than I am now. (...)

*Here's the first statement of positive change with the project. To be "cru/a" (raw) refers to immaturity, to not being ready. Cat. 2*

*The student says "everybody was 'cru', I was much more 'crua' than I am now." This suggests that she is not referring to a specific skill, but probably to a general improvement, either in language skills or in other aspects, noted in relation to the proposed approach. Cat. 3*

R – See? To my reading, for me, it was great. I was talking to M, M lent me a book, it was super easy. When I picked up the book I said 'oh, gee...' All the time I would open the book, go to the dictionary, open the book and go to the dictionary. (...) Now I got back to the book, now I feel more prepared to read the book. And there are words I do not know, but I have an idea of what they

mean. You don't have to be looking up in the dictionary all the time. For me it was very good.

*Corroborating the above interpretation, starting with the question "See?", it appears that the student has tried to emphasize what had been said. Expressions "for me it was great, for me it was very good" indicate her attitude, motivated with the project. Cat. 3*

*When she tried to read for the first time, she thought: "ai, credo," (oh, gee..), indicating difficulty of getting the job done. The change is reinforced by the repetition of the word "now", "now I'm back again in the book, now I feel more prepared to read the book." She is probably referring to the development of linguistic abilities, strategies which allow a more fluent reading. Cat. 3.*

Rf- Vocabulary was also important, when the project started I knew almost nothing, now with the Project we learned many words (...)

*The student's attitude is signaled by the word "important." Change is signaled with "when the project started" and "now." The student refers to the linguistic benefit of vocabulary acquisition with the project. Cat. 3*

G- Understanding a text in English requires much more patience than understanding it in Portuguese, then it helped me a lot in my Portuguese as well.

*(the group signals understanding and agreement)*

*The student realized a link between reading in English and reading in Portuguese, ie., the EFL class knowledge reaches beyond itself. This was an important finding, recognized by experts, but rarely noted by students. Cat.1*

P - Who else, Z, T?

*(laughs - Z does not like talking)*

T - I find it very important the fact that we go deeper in the reading, as in the text *Human Is*, I thought it was cool the author seeking for words that (...) sound like a machine, you know, I found it very interesting, I had never observed (...) Before, I read superficially and thought I had understood, now the English text, we would take a little bit and would take longer reading. We learned to read in a different way, as M said before, we would read and think we had understood, I found it very interesting. (...) I started reading much faster.

*"I find it very important" indicates the student's attitude regarding her deeper readings. She noted the important role of the words, and appreciated the author's work. The student demonstrates sensitivity to this literary feature, integration of language. There was perception of deeper reading, as shown by the contrast "before, we read superficially, ... now the English text, we would take a little bit and would take longer...". Cat. 2*

*"We learned to read in a different way." Here the student refers to going deeper in reading. When she says that now she reads faster, it is obvious the benefit of tackling a large amount in a shorter time, though she declares "we would take a little bit and would take longer reading", showing perception of the need to go deeper in the text for better readings. Cat.3.*

M - I found it interesting, you know, that when we take the course book, it is all ... (*signs with parallel hands raising and lowering*), whereas here, the literary text plays with words .

*The student uses body language to indicate his opinion on the textbook — something confined (between the constant space of parallel hands) and repeated (the forearms and hands raised and lowered in constant motion). In contrast, in the literary text the student notes a play area. It seems that the perception of the possibility of "playing with words" is a knowledge that has been noted at least more closely". Cat. 3.*

M - (...) it is like that ad of Diners' credit card with that door, it catches your eye, it is advertising, not literature, but it plays with words, draws your attention to something that...

*The student noted the literary characteristic of language in the foreground. He observes that, having a communicative function — to sell —, the ad is not literary, but the focus on form calls literary attention. Cat. 2*

G- The issues ... I think ... I found two things, first that it encouraged me to come here, the class was cool, you know? And second, it began to address issues of major themes, you know, like love for example, love is something that relates to all humanity, then each one can think their life, you know? Associate things.

*The student declared his motivation to come to class: "encouraged me to come ... class was cool." Cat. 3*

*The student's perception of the ontological value of the themes: "Love is something that relates to all humanity", and the relationship between himself, the themes and all mankind, feeling himself as a part of it. The student found in literary texts a metaphor of each one's life, with the possibility of reflecting over it and making associations. Cat. 1*

Rf- (*interrupting*) – Like, you know, they have tried to improve the text book and they messed it up. They tried to put a lot of stuff that has nothing to do to try to disguise the grammar so it wouldn't be so boring and it became even more boring (*group laughs*).

*The student contrasts what was achieved using the EFL proposed class with the classes that use mainly the text book, clearly approving the proposed class. Cat. 3.*

M - Even if you don't know beforehand you look and say, I've seen it, then you go looking it up, go seeking (...)

*The student takes responsibility for his learning when he says "you go looking it up, go seeking." It suggests gain of autonomy. Cat. 2.*

P - And you, Ro? You did not say anything.  
(group laughter - Ro does not like talking)

Ro - Look, my vocabulary has improved a lot after the project was started, and also it was not that boring thing, the lesson in the book, lessons where you have to follow the text book.

*The linguistic benefit of vocabulary is mentioned again, in association with the development of the project. The student indicates rejection of "that boring thing, the lesson in the book", indicating preference to the proposed approach. Cat. 3.*

P - (to Rf) You liked the poems better, didn't you, the smaller texts?

Rf - (nodding) After you had read and interpreted, everybody talking, it is more than a gigantic text.

P- Everyone thinks like Rf, that smaller texts are more interesting?  
(nods confirming, it can be heard "liked better," "more interesting")

M - (...) the love (...) I thought that generated more discussion than those big (texts) four, five, six pages.

R - Yes, the one of the ring, alliance, love, gee, it had four, five lines and meant ... (a sweeping gesture with the arm, making a semi-circle).

*It can be noted an awareness in relation to poetry as a productive space to sprout a number of ideas and thoughts, which were discussed. The group discussion was recognized as important to get to most valuable knowledge, which is a central learning experience for the realization of citizenship. Cat. 1*

*The idea of a proportional relation between size and depth was deconstructed, which may indicate a less naïve vision of what could research appear as obvious.*

Next follows a table with the results found in the three research sources.

**Table 1.** *General Representation of Categories in the 3 Different Sources*

|                    | <b>Cat. 0</b> | <b>Cat.1</b> | <b>Cat. 2</b> | <b>Cat. 3</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Student's diaries  | 03            | 22           | 43            | 33            | 101          |
| Teacher's diaries  | 02            | 04           | 14            | 05            | 25           |
| Final conversation | -             | 04           | 17            | 15            | 36           |
| Total              | 05            | 30           | 74            | 53            | 162          |
| %                  | 4 %           | 18,5 %       | 45,6 %        | 32,7 %        | 100 %        |

### Final Considerations

It's not difficult to see the implications for students who do not wait passively for what the teacher, text or any symbol of authority or power have to tell them, but realize that they can construct meanings of the realities that surround them.

English teaching, undeniably important in so many ways, can always be enriched if, along with the knowledge of the language, students can develop their autonomy and their role of subjects in the reading of their lives and their contexts. Language learning can only be favored, if not by the exposure to words and structures, reading, negotiating meanings, learning the multiplicity of possible meanings, then because students should note other reasons, durable, strong, connected to their world, to become interested in the class, and one can expect Education to happen.

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