# Literature in Language Lessons

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ABSTRACT Teaching modern foreign languages is not all about communicative skills. It is also about testing functional abilities. While we still pay lip service to the creed of communicative language teaching, we have adopted test formats and teaching styles that follow a hidden agenda: the production of human capital. The main objective of teaching is being shifted from communicative competence to cognitive measurement. This article argues that using literature in the modern foreign language (MFL) classroom is perfectly compatible with the communicative approach and the curriculum. It highlights the fact that literature, once driven out by communicative language teaching (CLT), could now help to bring back the 'communicative spirit' that is in danger of being drowned by competency-based teaching and testing.

Imagine going to the cinema and watching a film where everybody can put on powerful 'introspection glasses'. Putting on those 'introspecs' would enable you to squeeze in your own dialogue, try out different scenes and solutions, or even see yourself acting out one sequence from the many lives you could have lived. This fantastic experience might become reality one of these days. So long as we can only ponder about the futuristic excitements that lie ahead of us, we might, should we wish to devise a similar experience, content ourselves by reading a book.

I enjoy reading. And I am convinced that literature can play an important role in learning foreign languages. Advocating the use of simplified literature in modern foreign language (MFL) classes was difficult enough when I started teaching 20 years ago. Today it seems to be a lost battle. My plea to reconsider the use of literature in MFL classes and my defence of simplification might seem to be out of date, for neither literature nor simplified texts are in vogue. And yet, not only can simplified literature be easily justified, it can even become an island of hope for those who are not over-enthusiastic about the recent reforms.

### GERM, as Usual

The GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) does not openly ban literature from the classroom, but it seems to have become, as with philosophy or Latin, a superfluous luxury. The most prominent educational reform carried out recently in Austria is the new A-level examination which was introduced in 2015. New coursebooks in Austrian schools start preparing students for different exam formats years ahead of time. The focus is still on communicative skills, at least in theory. The output-oriented reforms have made standardised testing all-important. Even communication has become a standardised test format. Teaching is on the way to becoming prefabricated.

Only a few years ago it was still quite difficult to find standardised activities, i.e. test-like tasks. Each test and exam was created by the teacher for one individual class. The tasks were created or adapted in accordance with the work of the students. Preparing tailor-made lessons, tests and exams is a time-consuming business. Standardised exams will change all that. I am not saying that it is all for the worse, but there is not the shadow of a doubt that all the changes and reforms have little to do with didactic considerations. They are clearly motivated by economic concerns (Dixon, 2017; Zaiser, 2017). 'Private and global education businesses are interested in profitable education enterprises' (Ball, 2012, p. 24). This has led to a veritable 'datafication of pedagogy' (Roberts-Holmes, 2017, p. 167). I sadly agree with Guy Roberts-Holmes, who writes that 'children acquire and reproduce pre-determined knowledge as they are readied for the neo-liberal values of the marketplace' (Roberts-Holmes, 2017, p. 161).

If there are still literary texts to be found in competency-oriented textbooks, they usually serve as the basis from which factual and logical pieces of information can be extracted from the text, thereby testing the linguistic and cognitive competence of the students. Literature is not treated differently from other texts. Literature does not fit into this new mode of teaching, because discussing literature challenges common beliefs and social evils. Competency-based teaching has elegantly shifted the focus away from ideas and meaning towards matters of details and the ability to follow instructions. The recent educational reforms combine neo-liberal and neoconservative aspects. 'This entails maximising key skills, but also requires the production of a suitable mindset or attitude – a working class which is diligent but uncritical' (Wrigley, 2015, p. 198).

The general mood among teachers is resignation or cool-headed realisation that we have to cut our coat according to our cloth. Economic growth seems to be a sacred cow. The widening gap in the distribution of incomes is seen as a lamentable but inevitable trend. If we are not happy about the reforms in our schools, we need to change our economy.

> The only tangible hope I can see is to change the current economic model, as suggested by Joseph Stiglitz in America, Daniel Cohen in France or Christian Felber in Austria, to name but a few. Before

there is any hope that education itself can change, we need to
change the economy (Zaiser, 2017, p. 288).

Although hope lies in a different economy, and even though we cannot stop the
flood that threatens to drown our beliefs and hopes, we have to adopt a
constructive attitude. Laments will not save us from the flood. We have to build
boats. Literature can help us. In writing a plea for more literature in language
classes, I do not oppose any curricular aims and objectives. I do not even
contradict the reformers. Their real aims (social efficiency, productivity, pay cuts
and increasing shareholder values) are wrapped up in beautiful wordings. So
why not use the expensive wrapping for a different gift?

## Literature and Foreign Languages

Learning foreign languages at school should enable us, first of all, to express our
feelings and opinions, convey or respond to pieces of information and
communicate with other people. The 'communicative aim' is firmly established.
Nearly all teachers and learners of modern foreign languages will agree on this
main objective, and so do I. While this seems to be obvious, we might forget
that there are at least three other reasons for acquiring linguistic skills in a
foreign language.

What other good reasons might there be for learning a foreign language
apart from exchanging pieces of personal and factual information with
shopkeepers, taxi drivers, hairdressers, colleagues in other countries,
acquaintances who have become friends or new members of the family? The
answer is short and therefore incomplete: (1) to give ourselves access to literary
works and more generally to attain 'education' [1]; (2) to develop cognitive
skills; and (3) to further personal development.

The ascent of the 'communicative approach' or CLT (communicative
language teaching) during the 1960s was the first wound given to literature in
the MFL classroom because to study it was seen as contrary to communicative
objectives. The second wound came from the recent 'global education reforms'
(GERM) centring on standardisation and 'outcome measurement'. This last
attack might deliver the death blow for literature in the classroom. Discussion
of literature cannot be reduced to standardised tests. Such discussion contains a
subversive energy that cannot be suppressed as easily now as in previous
centuries. So (the argument goes) it is best to do without it.

Were these lines written last year or thirty years ago?

There was a time when literature was accorded high prestige in
language study, when it was assumed that part of the purpose of
language learning, perhaps even the most essential part, was to
provide access to literary works. There was a time when it was
assumed, furthermore, that the actual process of learning would be
enlivened and indeed facilitated by the presentation of poems, plays,

and prose fiction. But that time is past, and now literature hardly
figures at all in language programmes.[2]

We still talk about 'communicative aims' when teaching foreign languages, but is it not, rather, that we are asked to develop our students' cognitive skills and train them to be good at observing instructions? In the field of MFL, competencies and skills have become synonymous. Very few teachers care about the difference between assessing an exam response and gauging the acquired level of competence demonstrated.

So this is where we are at school when teaching MFL: combining communicative aims with obsessive assessment of students' abilities. I think we should combine communicative aims with 'personal development'.

## Literature at School

Far too often, engagement with literature is reduced to a matter of summaries, characterisation and comparisons of all sorts. In a more academic way we could add literary history, narrative technique, point of view, textual background, and the philosophical implications of the text, to name but a few. But all that has nothing to do with the principal aim of literary texts: to absorb the reader's interest, to entertain and stir up thoughts that lead away from everyday life. Reading, first of all, should be concerned about the impact it has on the reader:

> Reader-response criticism has taught us to base the acts of teaching
> upon the act of reading; more particularly, to ground our
> methodology upon informed ideas of reading and responding rather
> than upon functionally-conceived notions of comprehension and
> criticism. The latter pair are ends rather than means.
> (Benton, 1996, p. 33)

There is one piece of English music that has become very special for me. It is the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. With reference to it, I shall try to exemplify what 'reader-response', or in this case 'listener-response', could mean.

We might discuss the principal themes in Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and go into detail about the 'expanded string orchestra'. We might compare it with the 'Third Mode Melody' by Tallis himself and find the most interesting comparisons. Listening to Thomas Tallis could invite us to go back to the Renaissance and the religious and political turmoil of that time. It might prompt us to wonder what a 'Phrygian mode' exactly is. Reading from, and talking about, Ralph Vaughan Williams' and Thomas Tallis' biographies could fill up more than one lesson.

All this will probably not really help us enjoy listening to Thomas Tallis or Ralph Vaughan Williams. I do not want to belittle the academic and analytic mode of looking at music or literature. Literary theory is exciting: it can help us to deepen our insight into structural and cultural phenomena. It can increase the

pleasure of reading. But it will most probably not spark a sustained interest in literature.

Watching Peter Weir's film *Master and Commander* led me to Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia* and when I listen to it I still see the endless sea and sense the longing and the yearning of the human soul in quest of greatness.

We should start by verbalising what is important, interesting or astonishing for the students when they begin reading a book. I usually invite students to choose a simplified book in small groups and then present it by talking about the people in the book (and questioning the actions and hopes of the characters), acting out scenes, interviewing the author, relating the book to their own interests and explaining what happened. I do not ask for a summary of the content of the book. Even before presenting the book, students discuss it in small groups. Sometimes I talk with students about a book they have chosen to read. 'Talk is crucial for the transforming or recording of prior knowledge to produce new, more adequate or commensurate interpretations or understandings; that is, to produce the new known' (Yarker, 2016, p. 110). I might say that we do not so much talk about literature as about ourselves. We need other people to find out who we are, and in the world of books we can find a multitude of people with whom we can share our thoughts and imaginative escapades.

This open-ended approach involving students' personal experience and knowledge is much more stimulating and rewarding than answering multiple-choice comprehension questions about the text.

Why, after all, should we want to learn anything about the 'Phrygian mode' unless we like Thomas Tallis? Why should we want to scrutinise short passages of a text if the meaning is of no interest to us? Testing dates and facts is so easy and testing cognitive skills (or simply students' intelligence) so tempting, while teaching literature is so difficult... So what should we do? Give in? Give up? Give away our beliefs?

Not so very long ago I asked myself a very serious question:

How will I be able, in this professionally polished and competency-oriented school, to act according to my personal conviction? How will I be able now to continue teaching when obliged to conform to standardised expectations? (Zaiser, 2017, p. 288)

This article is a first attempt to answer this serious question. Using literature in the classroom both to offer individual development and to foster communicative skills will help me see my work as a meaningful contribution to my pupils' formative years. Open-ended discussion and the linking of new insights to existing knowledge and experience is a fundamental principle of learning. If the authorities and the 'shapers of education' want to hinder the advancement of social equality, then they might well call discussion 'idle chatter' (Yarker, 2016, pp. 114-115). They would not admit, of course, that 'idle chatter' could lead to thinking people who do not function any more according to 'Baseline Assessment' or 'prophetic pedagogy' (Roberts-Holmes, 2017, p. 162).

## Literary Theory and Simplified Texts

Theoretical positions to do with 'reader-oriented theories', 'reception theory' or 'aesthetic reading' captured my attention a couple of years ago. It is not the structure of the text or its narrative technique which is at the centre of investigation here, neither is it the life of the author, the text's historical background or the circumstances enabling literary production. It is the reader's mind. And there is a good reason for this: 'The individual human mind is the centre and origin of all meaning' (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 51).

Reading a literary text creates mental images that 'will inevitably be coloured by the reader's "existing stock of experience"' (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 55). Not all the details about people and events can be written down in the text. Some might be left out intentionally (as in detective novels). A text may resemble a painting made by quick strokes of a brush: a vivid image deliberately lacking every last detail. There are, according to Wolfgang Iser [3], 'blanks' in the text which the reader automatically fills in, adding his or her own personal experience and thereby engendering a unique creation: the text as read.

> The reader's existing consciousness will have to make certain internal adjustments in order to receive and process the alien viewpoints which the text presents as reading takes place. This situation produces the possibility that the reader's own 'world-view' may be modified as a result of internalising, negotiating and realising the partially indeterminate elements of the text: to use Iser's words, reading 'gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated'. (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 57)

Reader-oriented theories concentrate on the experience of reading. 'The focus is no longer on the text alone but on the interaction between text and reader' (Bredella, 1996, p. 2). Biographical details about the author, the text and its literary value, the historical background or the links to other texts are in the background. 'Aesthetic reading' – not perhaps the most fortunate term – simply means that 'the reader has to bring his or her experiences to the text' (Bredella, 1996, p. 3).

And here is the summary of a fairy tale where this could happen... Once upon a time on a dark and stormy night a salesman lost his way back home and ended up in a strange castle. He ate and slept in the castle but did not see anyone. In the morning, just before leaving the castle (which was enchanted), he plucked a rose for his youngest daughter. Suddenly a ferocious beast appeared, half-scaring the salesman to death. Because the salesman had taken the flower, said the beast, he could not leave the castle. Eventually, the beast agreed to let the salesman say goodbye to his daughters before returning to the castle and his fate. Yet it was not the salesman who came back. It was his youngest daughter.

'Beauty and the Beast' (Leprince de Beaumont, 2007) is a simple story and at first I was reluctant to read it with my students. I was afraid they would think it childish. Nor was I keen on finding discussion hijacked by one of those

Disneyfied versions. When finally we decided to read it, I was astonished by how serious my 17-year-old students were about the events and the decisions made by the characters in this story. I myself had been more concerned about the vocabulary and the grammatical structures in the text. They were intent on discussing the beautiful girl's sense of responsibility and guilt. She had asked for a rose and therefore, they felt, she was responsible for the beast's anger.

Before being allowed to leave the castle in order to say goodbye to his daughters, the salesman must promise to come back. Why should he keep his promise? Why should he allow his youngest daughter to take his place? Simply because the rose was meant for her? When we think about this, we will 'bring our own experiences' and imagination to the text. There are no standardised answers. We all might overlook some details in the text while we wander off on our own paths. 'Responses to literature result from a matrix of cultural experience, imaginative insight, inter-textual knowledge and linguistic ability... Reading is not the discovering of meaning (like some sort of archaeological "dig") but the creation of it' (Benton, 1996, pp. 30, 31).

As we question what the salesman's youngest daughter, her father and the beast-like person do and how they act, we might think about what we would have done in their place. Their problems become 'real' although it is a very 'unlikely' story indeed. Story-telling and reading is a way of understanding the world around us. Telling a story includes selecting certain features about a character, highlighting some details and leaping from one day to the next within a single sentence. It is a way of adjusting and reorganising one's view of the world, and often of trying out what life might be like in other places, at other times, or with other opportunities.

> While literary work does not represent objects, it does refer to the extra-literary world by selecting certain norms, value systems or 'world-views'. These norms are concepts of reality which help human beings to make sense of the chaos of their experience. The text adopts a 'repertoire' of such norms and suspends their validity within its fictional world. (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 56)

Our mind is offered access to possible and imagined worlds. Fictional texts could be seen as a bridge between the 'real world', full of daily chores and stressful routine, and our daydreams. Thus fleeting mental images turn into a fully verbalised text that allows us to explore different lives. Literary works reinvent a series of actions. They highlight certain emotional settings and explore the regions of our heart that are difficult for words to reach, where we are 'exposed on the cliffs of the heart', as Rainer Maria Rilke puts it.[4] That way, a book, just like a simple and simplified story, can become a train that we climb aboard, taking us on a trip far away and bringing us nearer to ourselves.

Language not bound to a specific contextualised situation (e.g. two people sitting next to each other and talking about the forthcoming weekend) tends to be 'polysemous'. It can have various meanings. 'When I look out of the window, I see a walnut tree. It reminds me of my childhood.' This could be the

beginning of a novel. As we leaf through the pages, we might find out more about this tree. We might find out if it is still the same tree or if it brings back memories from the past with one or more other trees, just as the walnut tree might stand for a dramatic experience not fully unveiled.

Already the first sentences might invite us to dig up memories of our own past and mingle them with the story we are reading. I might think of a dozen walnut trees I had planted as a child. One has survived and knows all about the life of a boy who grew up on a farm in the late sixties. Modern barns have curtailed the former wilderness of this garden. That might evoke other secret gardens in the reader's mind.

Although the plot and the characters might be 'unrealistic' or far away from our everyday experience, fictional texts 'evoke a sense of reality'. Reading literary texts has the peculiarity that they induce a 'sense of realness' (Cicurel, 1991, p. 127).[5] We perceive a made-up story to be relevant and true. Literature provides a perception of reality. And this is a very important thing in language classes:

> Above all, literature can be helpful in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters in readers... Engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system. (Collie & Slater, 2008, p. 5)

> The reader is eager to find out what happens as events unfold; he or she feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. (Collie & Slater, 2008, p. 6)

Literature can provide a meaningful orientation among chaotic and disturbing realities usually hidden by social etiquette and everyday preoccupations. It can equally well shake our beliefs and unsettle the comfort of an orderly life. Literature is something we need and enjoy at the same time. It is an 'anthropological necessity':

> As for the origin of the poietic art altogether, it would seem that two causes account for it, both of them deep-rooted in the very nature of man. To imitate is, even from childhood, part of man's nature ... and so is the pleasure we all take in copies of things... (Whalley, 1997, p. 57)

Now that all educational and pedagogical beliefs are threatened by a flood of standardised outcome-related obsessions, literature could become an 'ark' to save the 'communicative spirit' of teaching. Before we can fully justify this belief, we should consider the concept of 'authenticity'.

### Authenticity

It is immensely important to talk about authenticity. The trend of using 'authentic texts' in the MFL classroom has gained a new momentum, since competency-oriented teaching is all about 'authentic situations'. Yet although teachers have been told to use authentic material for at least as long as I have been teaching, which is exactly 20 years now, I have never heard anyone examine 'authenticity' a bit more closely.

When I came across Henry G. Widdowson's thoughts about authentic language four years ago it was like a revelation for me. I could finally say what felt wrong to me about the emphasis on 'authentic materials' in language classes; an emphasis that had become almost a religious dogma for communicative language teaching. This is what the renowned English linguist wrote:

> I am not sure that it is useful to talk about authentic language as such at all. I think it is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. Authenticity in this view is a function of the interaction between the reader/hearer and the text which incorporates the intentions of the writer/speaker. We do not recognize authenticity as something there waiting to be noticed, we realize it in the act of interpretation.
> (Widdowson, 1979, p. 165)

'Authenticity' lies in the communicative process and not in the text. A simplified reader can be even more authentic than a newspaper article from the same day. An announcement at the railway station sounds 'authentic' to us, but what meaning does it convey to the students in a language class who are not waiting for a train and could not care less for any vital information given to the tired passengers waiting for a train?

> Too exclusive a concern for 'authentic' language behaviour as communication can lead to a disregard of methodological principals upon which the pedagogy of language teaching must depend.
> (Widdowson, 1979, p. 163)

In a nutshell: the communicative approach to language learning should be concerned with 'authentic communication', and not with texts and situations that are authentic for native speakers in a real context.

The current tide of competency-oriented teaching and testing focuses on 'authentic situations'. Just as 'authenticity' has not been fully understood in the context of language learning, it is wrongly believed that situations and contexts can be transferred into the classroom (or even to a heightened extent into the exam situation) without losing their meaning. Which real-life situation can be brought in front of the examining board without losing its 'authenticity'?

'Authentic language' is ideally produced by native speakers who share cultural views and a real need for, or interest in, information. Readers or listeners in England need not be told who the boy 'asking for more' is.[6] A

simple reference or an image suffices to evoke numerous details and convictions. Authentic language is not easily transferable. Students need to be concerned by and about the text in a direct way. This implies that they have to understand what they read and that the spoken or written word has to be relevant for them.

Consequently, it could be argued that to read simplified literature in the classroom is more authentic than to practise, in Vienna, giving directions using a map of London.

> It is not the case that communicative language teaching focuses on meaning whereas the benighted structuralist approach did not: It focuses on pragmatic meaning in context rather than semantic meaning in the code. And the focus on pragmatic meaning does not require the importation of authentic language use into the classroom. This would be an impossibility anyway as the classroom cannot replicate the contextual conditions that made the language authentic in the first place. (Widdowson, 1998, p. 715)

These considerations are of vital importance. The 'authentic text' co-exists only with its contextual situation.

> The authenticity or reality of language use in its normal pragmatic functioning depends on its being localised within a particular discourse community. Listeners can only authenticate it as discourse if they are insiders. But learners are outsiders, by definition, not members of user communities. So the language that is authentic for native speaker users cannot possibly be authentic for learners. (Widdowson, 1998, p. 711)

We can have two definitions of 'authentic language'. We could consider a text produced for native speakers as 'real'. Or we could more importantly claim that 'authenticity' is to be found in the interaction between the reader/listener and the text, regardless of whether the text is simplified, sophisticated or shortened.

> There is no such thing as authentic language data. Authenticity is realized by appropriate response and the language teacher is responsible for designing a methodology which will establish the conditions whereby this authenticity can ultimately be achieved. (Widdowson, 1979, pp. 171-172)

Nation and Deweerdt agree:

> Authenticity is not a characteristic of texts, but is the result of the interaction between a reader and a text. If a learner reads a text, and responds to it in a way that we might expect of someone who comprehends the text, then reading the text is authentic for that learner. This response might involve understanding the text, enjoying its message, seeing the strengths and weaknesses in its content and expression, or seeing its contribution to a wider field. (Nation & Deweerdt, 2001, p. 56)

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## Conclusion

It has been shown that simplified books are compatible with 'communicative language teaching'. Discussing literature fosters a form of individualisation that might challenge the neo-liberal hunger for power and strengthen the social coherence of society. It is very different from the sort of standardised individualisation so dear to modern reformers, producing functional units. I truly hope that my work as a teacher, amounting as it does to a grain of sand on the beach, will lead to social advancement and not to functionalised obedience.

Literature should play a role in learning foreign languages. The recent reforms all too often reduce teachers to parrots sticking to a mechanistic way of delivering lessons. Teaching, however, is related to the personality of a teacher and not to prefabricated teaching materials or test results. In a school where teachers resignedly follow the dictates of financialised capitalism, literature could become the leading light bringing us back to true education.

## Notes

[1] In German I would say '*Bildung*'. This is a word that cannot be easily translated into English, as we can see from the loan word 'bildungsroman'. *David Copperfield* is a good example of this type of a coming-of-age novel, in which the personal development of the character is a central part of the text. The concept of 'bildung' has been vividly discussed since the introduction of 'bildungsstandards' where the reformers are not clear if they want to have 'standards in education' or 'standardised education'. 'Bildung' is a lofty concept to do with formation, education and personal development. The current 'global education reforms' (GERM) have led to a fundamental '*um*bildung' (or reshuffle and shake-up).

[2] Henry G. Widdowson wrote these lines more than 30 years ago (Widdowson, 1984, p. 160). Widdowson is an eminent linguist writing widely about communicative language teaching. From 1998 to 2001 he taught at the University of Vienna.

[3] Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) was a leading member of the so-called Constance School of German reception theory. His best-known book, 'Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung', was translated into English (Iser, 1978). He 'presents the text as a potential structure which is "concretised" by the reader in relation to his or her extra-literary norms, values and experience' (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 55). A key point in his theory is the concept of 'blanks' or 'gaps' in the text, or in German, '*leerstellen*'. Some gaps might be intentional, as in detective novels, where we are invited to find the criminal without knowing all the details. Most gaps are a natural consequence of using language: it is simply impossible to narrate a story without leaving a thousand details open for imaginative speculation. This is not a shortcoming, as it would be in a manual for a lawn-mower. It is one key feature of literature.

[4] Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) might be regarded as the most important German-speaking poet, and not only of his own time...

[5] '*La lecture offre la particularité ... de provoquer un effet de réel de telle sorte que le texte est perçu comme vrai*' (Cicurel, 1991, p. 127).

[6] In other countries not everybody, even fluent speakers of English, might know that it is Oliver Twist who is asking for more.

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