

The Difficulties of Teaching English through Literature in the Israeli EFL Classroom

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Abstract: The teaching of English through literature has become a central component and source of the language curriculum as well as a crucial aim of English instruction. Literature has always been an important element in the Israeli English curriculum emphasizing its importance, highlighting its usage as a tool in teaching English as a second or foreign language and stressing its ability to teach critical thinking. Yet despite all the updated English Literature Program Reforms, the specific guidelines, the instructions and the strategies on how to teach English through literature, Israeli teachers are still facing difficulties when teaching English literature in class.

Keywords: Israel, Curriculum, Bagrut Exams, Literature, Second Language, Foreign language

1. Introduction

The Israeli English curriculum emphasizes the importance of English as the main foreign language learned throughout the world. It aims to address the needs of both teachers and students of the country as it extends on the issues incorporated in previous curricula, addressing the changes within the society and the needs of the 21 Century. Literature was always an important element in the Israeli English curriculum since 1973 (the first issued English curriculum), focusing on the teaching of English through literature and culture. A supplementary Literature Reform was included in the curriculum in 2008 and it was updated every few years by the Ministry of Education focusing more and more on the importance of teaching English through literature in the English lessons. The reform intended to focus on the learning of literature and the

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implementation of Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) at all levels and in all domains of the curriculum, in order to encourage the enhancement of learners' comprehension, cultural understanding and critical thinking.

The teaching of English through literature has become a basic component and an ultimate aim of English instruction in Israel as Israeli English teachers have been occupied with the innovative literature reform for the past decade. The process within the Israeli English curriculum to teach literature and the HOTS has gone through a long process since 1973, to correspond to the qualifications and requirements of today's teachers and students, yet never leaving out the option of being updated and expanded every now and then. The Israeli revised English Curriculum and the new English Literature Program Reform have aimed to accompany learners and enable them to embrace the challenges of the 21st century while promoting excellence and equity in student learning outcomes. Yet despite all the updated English Literature Program Reforms, the specific guidelines, the instructions and the strategies on how to teach English through literature, Israeli teachers are still facing difficulties when teaching English literature in class.

2. English as a Second/ Foreign Language in Israel

Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL) is known as teaching the English language to students with a different first language. English second language (ESL) is usually offered in countries, where English is the dominant language. Similar to most countries in the world today, English plays a major role in Israel, both as a universal and local language in multiple domains such as business, media, education, and even in daily interactions. English is the language used in all of the texts and articles used in the academia for almost all disciplines. Shohamy (2014:273) elaborates on this issue pointing out that the English language is widely used in the cyber space, in global, international organizations and high-technological companies; it is also a language heard in most films and television programs accompanied by translations. Finally, "it is a language that all students are required to learn from a very early age of elementary school and through the end of secondary school; in addition, a high level of English proficiency is required for admission into higher education institutions" (Shohamy, 2014:273).

English is incorporated in many domains of life in Israel as well as in virtual spaces on a highly proficient level of English. However, in the education systems of elementary, junior high and high schools the issue is different. The schools do not provide sufficient levels of English teaching, this in return impacts the English proficiency level of the students. The official and the main dominant language of Israel is Hebrew, therefore, the status of English in Israel is between high prestige and dominance to rejection and opposition by those who fear that English will become more dominant than Hebrew as Shohamy (2014:280) explains. Shohamy further explains that there is a realization that English is important, global, international, and

functional, but this realization is accompanied by questions and doubts as to the future of the Hebrew language, especially since the latter has only “recently” been revived and has become a vital national language (2014:281).

Amara and Rahman (2002, as sighted in Shomany, 2014) state that in Israel Arabs make up 20% of the Israeli population, the Arabic language is the medium of instruction in Arab schools and a vital, important community language; Hebrew, though, is the language of power that Arabs are expected to acquire in order to function in most places in Israeli society as it is ‘de facto’ the national language in spite of the official status of both languages. Therefore, for Arabs, English is a third even fourth language (they learn spoken and written Arabic, Hebrew then English). English is a compulsory language from the third grade in both Arab and Jewish schools. This creates a sense of inequality between Arabs and Jews due to the fact that “Arabs are expected to reach identical levels of proficiency in English as Jews, and they are in fact being compared on the same English tests at the end of High School” (Shomany, 2014:282). The scores of these tests are the main criteria used for acceptance to all Israeli universities. This creates a discrimination between Arabs and Jews which is not taken into account when Arab students apply to higher education. Learning English for Arab students in Israel is considered as learning a FL whereas, for Jews it is considered as a SL. This results in the fact that “for Arab students, the lack of high proficiency in English poses a major obstacle, and it is detrimental to their participation in higher education. It is no surprise then that the scores of the Arab students on those final tests are substantially lower than those of the Jewish students” (Shohamy, 2014:282).

3. Challenges Israeli English teachers face

3.1 Beliefs and Attitudes of Israeli teachers

English teachers’ beliefs and attitudes have been an interesting matter for scholars throughout the years, due to the input they offer for the development of teaching and learning the English language. Teachers’ beliefs have a profound impact on their classroom ideologies and teaching. This recognition is crucial for teachers in order to prepare to teach English in their classrooms. Teachers’ beliefs can influence how they teach, what they teach, their attitudes towards teaching, and their learners’ beliefs. A recent study by Gilakjani and Sabouri, (2017) states that review related to the literature investigating teachers’ beliefs helps teachers change their methods to teaching and learning over time in order to bring about more improvement for language learners.

Researchers as Kuzborska (2011), Richards and Rodgers (2001), Harste and Burke (1977) all discussed the impact of teachers’ beliefs. They stated that teachers’ beliefs influence on teacher’ knowledge, on lesson planning, on the types of material they use, on classroom training, on their aims in teaching, procedures, their roles, and their learners.

According to Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler (1988) and Abdi and Asadi (2011) (as sighted in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017:80), the sources of teachers' beliefs are as follows:

1. Teachers' experience as language learners. Every teacher was previously a learner and taught in a way which shaped his/her belief about teaching.
2. Experience from teaching. Teaching experience is the central source of teachers' beliefs. Many techniques and methods used in class affect the teacher's belief about that technique.
3. Teachers' personality. Some teachers favor a specific method because it may relate to them or corresponds to their character.
4. Education-based or research-based principles. Teachers gain beliefs from the research about the principles of SL acquisition, from education, or from schools of thoughts like psychology.

It is obvious that almost all researches agreed that teachers' beliefs originate from many sources within teachers and affect their professional practice. Whether from content knowledge, to educational materials acquired, or from their own formal education, experience or even their personal religious beliefs. Teachers beliefs and attitudes influence and impact their teaching. Israeli English teachers come from different religions, backgrounds and cultures which definitely influence their teaching methods in the EFL literature classroom. In teaching literature, the objective of teaching holds a vital and essential role. The successfulness of the teaching is measured by how far the objective of teaching can be reached in the teaching and learning process. All English Israeli teachers thrive to reach the same goal; guaranteeing their students' success in the final English Literature Bagrut exams in Israel as well as engaging their students in the experience of learning literature.

Israeli English teachers' success in high schools is measured by the success of their students in the final Bagrut exams. Thus whatever beliefs they may have their main objective is to help their students pass their final Bagrut exams successfully. To achieve such an objective while teaching English, the teachers in the EFL literature classroom implement various methods, techniques, and approaches or choose the most effective and appropriate strategies in their teaching of English literature. The diverse use of techniques when teaching literature can be very useful. The appropriate methods, approaches, and techniques used by teachers in the EFL literature classroom enable the students to increase their competence both in language and in the learning of the literary pieces.

3.2 Challenges Arab English Teachers Face

English language teachers may encounter some problems within the area of teaching English through literature for several reasons. Some of which include the lack of preparation of teaching literature texts and programs. Another reason is the "absence of clear-cut objectives defining the role of literature in ESL / EFL, [or] language

teachers' not having the background and training in literature. [Other reasons stem from the] lack of pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in a classroom" (Hişmanoğlu, 2005:54).

Recently and with the spread of international English as a vital tool for communication, trade and worldwide exchange, more attention has been centered on the concerns, difficulties and needs of Arab learners studying English. English teachers in Israel face different problems when teaching English and further problems when teaching literature. When English teachers teach English to Arabic speakers, they need to take on several challenges. Both English and Arabic are alphabetic languages and are read phonetically – by breaking words into constituent sounds. Despite the similarity between English and Arabic in being alphabetic languages, there are notable differences in the way the human brain processes each language and the words within it. First of all, the completely different writing system between both languages can cause confusion as well as including problems caused by differences in the grammatical systems of English and Arabic. There can also be difficulties stemming from previous learning experiences and expectations about the role of the teacher.

The different alphabet makes reading and writing difficult for many Arab learners. Arabic is written from right to left, therefore, English looks backwards to Arabic speakers. Furthermore, the Arabic language does not have upper- and lower-case letters and, although punctuation is taught at school as part of the writing structure, it is not given attention as other aspects of the language. It is therefore common to find Arabic learners confusing and mixing big and small letters within sentences.

4. The Literature Program in Israeli Schools

Teaching English literature in Israeli high schools requires teachers to teach students different (3 or 6) literary pieces. The process of teaching the different literary texts are similar, the teacher must cover a series of components and teach several elements in order to allow a complete comprehension of the text studied. There are seven components, stated in the English Literature Handbook, (Israel MoE English Inspectorate,2013) which teachers must follow when teaching any literary pieces in the Israeli high school classroom.

1. The component of Pre- Reading
2. The component of Basic- Understanding
3. The component of Analysis and Interpretation
4. The component of Bridging Text to Context
5. The component of Post Reading
6. The component of Summative Assessment
7. The component Personal Response

According to the English Literature Handbook, (Israel MoE English Inspectorate, 2013) each component should cover different aspects of the literary text discussed.

Taken from the Israel MoE English Inspectorate, 2013:

Pre-Reading Activities

Pre-reading activities are activities which encourage and motivate the learners involvement in the subject and theme of the text.

Basic Understanding of Text

The activities for the Basic Understanding component should ensure that all learners have understood the basic story line or literal meaning of literary text. The questions used are those that relate to the literal meaning of the text. The EFL teacher is further required to teach and review relevant lexical items and grammatical structures in this component. When necessary, the teachers should teach relevant background knowledge

Analysis and Interpretation

The third component is analysis and interpretation in which the activities encourage learners to investigate and think beyond the literal meaning of the text. Teachers teaching this component usually include tasks that deal with literary terms and tasks that encourage learners to use higher order thinking skills (HOTS). Some specific HOTS should be taught explicitly: this may be done before, during or after reading a text. The Israeli English teachers teach the HOTS differently taking different issue into consideration such as the length of text, the theme, the setting, and the characters. Additional considerations are due to the level of the class and the teacher's preference.

Bridging Text and Context

This is a very important component in teaching EFL literature, therefore, the activities and questions for Bridging Text and Context inspire learners to understand the connections between the text, universal themes and related information and notions from other sources. These sources may include the autobiography of the author, historical aspects or the era in which the literary piece was written. Teachers may teach this component at any stage in the teaching of the unit.

Post-reading Activity

Teachers usually enjoy teaching this section as it offers learners the opportunity to be creative and innovative as they connect between the text(s) and their own experiences. Activities in the Post- Reading component allow for self-expression and creative answers to the text, and enable learners to apply a more comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the text and integrate information from different parts of the text.

Personal Response

Activities for personal response otherwise known as reflection encourage learners to articulate their thoughts about what they have learned and their thinking process. The reflection should be personal and relate to the following aspects of studying the text:

- a) The student's reflection on the piece of literature;

- b) The student's reflection on the process and method of learning and applying the HOTS;
- c) The student's reflection on how this process has influenced and impacted their reading and understanding of the text, giving specific examples.

According to the latest Literature Handbook (2017) the students write the Personal Response at the end of every year that they study literature. "Students at the four- and five-point level answer in English; students at the three-point level answer in Hebrew/Arabic" (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2017b:4). The aim is to get a comprehensive notion of what the student has learned from the literary text which HOTS the student can apply to their own life, what new things they learn and other similar questions (see appendix 1).

Summative Assessment

The last component is the Summative Assessment which provides the learners with the opportunity to prove their knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the literary text, including the specific HOTS studied.

The process of teaching a literary piece can be a load and confusion for some students when learn English through literature and, therefore, prevent them from reaching the main intention of learning literature. Israeli teachers of English have long complained about this process, elaborating that it is a load on the learning process of literature in class. The teachers have further related to the English lessons which are given weekly to teach English in high schools to be insufficient. The MoE grants each high school level (10th -12th grade) 4 to 5 English lessons per week. Teachers claim that this is insufficient to cover the material for the Bagrut exams at the end of high school. English Israeli teachers have to teach different skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening throughout high school along with the teaching of literature in order to enable the students to pass the four English Final state Bagrut exams. Therefore, it is vital that literature teachers in the Israeli high school classroom ensure the understanding of the context, and reduce the load of material given when teaching the literary piece. Teachers should further focus on the appreciation of the literature being taught rather than the analysis and breakdown of its elements thus promoting interesting and motivating lessons for students.

5. The Domain of Literature in the Israeli Curriculum

The Revised Israeli English Curriculum (2013) discusses four main domains (the areas of language ability and knowledge) in the teaching of English in Israel: Social Interaction; Access to Information; Presentation; and Appreciation of Language, Literature and Culture. The four domains are connected to one another and do not operate in isolation (Israeli MoE, 2013). The Domain of Appreciation of Language, Literature and Culture requires standards which define a complete body of knowledge and set of skills the learner must acquire.

The Revised Curriculum also elaborates on how the learners meet the standard for the domain of the Appreciation of Literature and Culture stating that when students can identify and describe events by using lower-order thinking skills, and by analyzing and interpreting literary texts, with higher-order thinking skills they meet the standards set for them (Israeli MoE, 2013). Therefore, teachers of literature are required to promote students to recognize and understand the usage of basic literary techniques, such as repetition, rhyme, imagery, metaphor, etc.

Teaching literature in the EFL classroom in Israel requires the teachers to make sure the students understand the historical, social and/or cultural contexts of the text and as well as understand who the author is. Students have to provide an oral, written or visual response to the literary text they learn. It is further expected of students to reflect on the literary text by using higher-order thinking skills. Comparing between different cultures, behaviors and tradition is another element EFL teachers aspire to reach through their teaching (Israeli MoE, 2013:29).

5.1 The Teaching Material in the English Israeli Curriculum

According to the Revised Curriculum (Israeli MoE, 2013) the teaching materials need to be approved by the MoE. EFL teachers have to abide by a list of principals when choosing to teach any literary piece. Some of the main issues teachers have to consider are texts that unprejudiced, inoffensive and non-stereotypical, they further have to choose from a variety of genera. Teachers also take into account the learners' age-group and level of language proficiency. Most important teachers teaching EFL literature promote independent learning and motivate students' interest in reading for pleasure when teaching EFL literature.

The Israeli MoE posted "The Teachers Handbook Requirements Section" in 2017 in order to illustrate the purpose of using literature and how to implement the literature program in Israeli high schools across the country. This took place after receiving feedback and different negative responses from the field, due to the load and burden English teachers felt as a result of the program which was launched in 2010. The aim of using literature in the classroom is not only to support the development of lexis knowledge and reading comprehension skills but also to open a window to the English speaking cultures. "This window provides access to a deep and genuine learning of language, including the art of writing and the intellectual perspective as manifested in literature learning" (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2017b).

Their ultimate goal of incorporating literature in the EFL classroom in Israel is because of its great importance in the inspiration, principals, values and insight that it can provide. The handbook, in its new form has stimulated much thinking to clarify the Bagrut (final state exam) literature program and is now divided into two sections, one, which is more technical and the other devoted to the pedagogy of teaching literature (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2017b; 2017c). The EFL

teacher in high schools in Israel can choose from a list of literary text which are found on the Israeli Ministry site, it includes 148 poems, 171 short stories 29 plays and 36 novels.

6. Israeli Teachers' General Language Proficiency

The Department for Planning and Development of Study Programs and Supervision in the Israeli MoE published a Booklet *Professional Standards for English Teachers: Knowledge and Performance* in 2004 which defined and described the “professional standards for English teachers in pre-service and in-service” learning (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2017a:21). The content of the Booklet (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2004) takes into account theories and approaches to EFL teaching. It set “standards for teachers in terms of knowledge and performance, it also outlines the core knowledge and performance that graduates and/or practicing teachers should have mastered” (2004:1).

Due to the recent changes and developments in language instruction, changes have occurred in the Israeli English curriculum and there was an expansion of the use of high technological tools in the teaching classroom. A committee in the MoE was formed to update the document, “which is supposed to serve as a basis for the planning and composition of courses in English teacher-training programs at colleges and universities as well as monitor professional development courses in the field” (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2017:21). The committee has not yet posted the new document for teachers and educators to use, yet it is expected to be completed by the end of 2019.

The 2004 Booklet set the standards for English Teachers as a professional profile requirement. It is very important that English teachers see their role not only as English teachers, but also as educators, promoting, encouraging and fostering the development of values, critical thinking and the student’s world knowledge. It is also important that EFL teachers promote their professional development through continuing with their formal education, attending in-service training sessions and different conferences in the matter subject as well as collaborating with their English staff and colleagues (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2004).

The most important standards Israeli teachers are required to sustain is language proficiency and awareness. Teachers should be “proficient in the English language, aware of its structure, and are able to teach it to learners” (Israel MoE English Inspectorate 2004:4). EFL teachers must know how the English language is structured how language functions in social contexts and how it differs from their native language. Foremost the EFL teachers must be able to teach their knowledge of the language in a way that is accessible and relevant to the language learner.

As for the requirements of teachers concerning the Domain of literature and culture they have to be familiar with a variety of literary texts and cultural aspects of the English-speaking world. Teachers have to use their personal knowledge to promote

learners' literary and cultural awareness and appreciation of the literature being taught. EFL teachers meet the professional standards for English teachers when they read with appreciation a variety of literary works in English and are aware of cultural, historical, and social backgrounds of the literature they read. It is very important that the EFL teachers are knowledgeable of the approaches to interpretation and analyze the literature they teach. It is a teachers' responsibility to encourage learners to read, appreciate, and value the literature they learn ((Israel MoE English Inspectorate, 2004:5)

English Israeli teachers come from different backgrounds, cultures and sectors mainly the Arabs and Jewish sector. Their language proficiency is different, and their education background and degree may be from diverse fields. However, the requirements to teach English in Israeli school is similar for all teachers of all sector and religions.

7. Requirements for Teaching English in Israel

English is a compulsory subject in Israel from the fourth grade; however, some elementary schools begin teaching English in the third grade. Moreover, there are a few schools that prefer to begin teaching English in the first and second grades. Therefore, teaching English in Israeli schools entails teachers to specific requirements. First they have to have knowledge of Hebrew, every English teacher has to speak, read and write in Hebrew. Secondly, English teachers must have an Academic Degree that is recognized by an academic institution and need to be approved by the Israeli MoE. Finally, Teachers are required to possess a Teacher's License.

8. Conclusion

Should teaching English through literature be part of an ESL/EFL curriculum? A question that has been asked among many scholars, educators and even researchers. "Today with the current focus in ESL on meeting the particular academic and occupational needs of the students, it is easy to view any attention to literature as unnecessary" (Mckay, 1982:529). There have been many arguments against using literature and for various reasons. The most common ones are because of the literature's structural complexity and unique use of language, which does not properly contribute to learning grammar -which is one of the main goals of ESL (Mckay, 1982). However, the teaching of English through literature has been and will remain a significant and crucial aspect of the Israeli English curriculum. Therefore, it is essential to understand the reasons which may prevent or prohibit the proper teaching and instruction of literature in Israeli classes. It has been proven in research and studies that learning literature encourages the enhancement of learners' comprehension, cultural understanding and critical thinking. Despite the arguments against its use in the

EFL/ESL classroom it has been shown “to promote a greater tolerance for cultural differences for both the teacher and the student” (Mckay1982:531).

Selecting literature is the one of the keys to success in using literature in the EFL/ESL class. A text which is very difficult on either a language or cultural level will have few benefits. Literature should indeed have a place in the ESL/EFL curriculum. “For many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions” (Mckay1982:531). The success in using literature, relies, greatly upon the selection of the texts studied which could be difficult for the learner on either the linguistic or conceptual level. The teaching process is another key to succeed in teaching literature in any Israeli classroom. “If we wish to promote truly aesthetic reading, it is essential that literature be approached not differently, but in a manner which establishes a personal and aesthetic interaction of a reader and a text” (Hasan, 2017:143). The methods and techniques English teachers use when teaching literature can highly influence the way that literary piece is perceived and understood by the students. Last but not least, English Israeli teachers’ personal understanding, comprehension and ability to teach literature is essential in the procedure of teaching English through literature in the Israeli high school classroom.

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