

## Enhancing employability skills by bringing literature back into the foreign language class: the *Litinclass* website

Ana Bela Almeida, University of Liverpool  
Idoya Puig, Manchester Metropolitan University

### Abstract

The international research network, “Literature in the Foreign Language Class” (*Litinclass*), was created with a view to exploring and sharing ideas on the numerous skills and benefits that can be derived from language learning through literature. In this paper, we will focus on how literature can have an important role in the development of specific employability skills in the language class, as it relates not only to purely linguistic abilities, but also helps foster other soft skills such as intercultural awareness, problem-solving abilities and critical thinking. Finally, we will consider the role of the *Litinclass* research group, and in particular the *Litinclass* website <https://litinclass.wordpress.com/>, in bringing together expertise in this area. This website, aimed at MFL teachers and researchers, both at school and university levels, aims to pool resources and methodologies in the area, and to bring innovation to the study of literature in the foreign language classroom.

**Keywords:** literature in the MFL classroom, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), new technologies in language learning, employability skills, intercultural awareness

### 1. Introduction: why *Litinclass*?

The international research network “Literature in the Foreign Language Class” (*Litinclass*)<sup>1</sup> was created with a view to exploring and sharing ideas on the numerous skills obtained and benefits deriving from language learning through literature. For some time, the value of some teaching content and, in particular, literature, was questioned (Edmondson 1997). Currently there is a renewed interest in literature which is gradually re-emerging in the language teaching curriculum, as demonstrated in numerous studies (Paran 2010; Sell 2005, Matos 2012, for example). Amos Paran, in his book on testing the untestable in language learning (and here the “untestable” also includes literature) sums up current trends with regards to literature in the language class:

(...) although the link between L2 learning and literature may not be as strong as it was in the past, the use of literatures is more prevalent than is commonly thought, and in many cases it never left the language curriculum. (Paran 2010: 6)

As further evidence of this growing interest, we find that the recent changes in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education Advanced level (A level) syllabus in schools in the UK show recognition of the importance of literature in the classroom, but more specifically in the language class: ‘Students will be expected to understand different types of written language, including relevant personal communication, public information, factual and literary texts, appropriate to this level’ (Department of Education 2013: 4).

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<sup>1</sup> The *Litinclass* research project is coordinated by Dr Idoya Puig and Ms Ana Bela Almeida, lecturers, respectively, at the Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Liverpool, and gathers collaborators from national (Ms María Muradas-Taylor, University of York) and international (Dr Gonçalo Duarte, University of Paris-Sorbonne 4) universities.

## 2. The role of literature in intercultural awareness and employability skills

This renewed interest in the teaching of literature in the language class is also related to a move towards a more global vision of language learning. Despite the present context of new technologies and media, the role of literature in language teaching is still unique. Recent studies have been looking at ways of teaching and learning, which, rather than ignoring literature, can utilise new media and technology in teaching without excluding traditional reading skills:

Textual literacy remains a central skill in the twenty-first century. Before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new (...). (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel and Robinson 2006: 19)

Bringing literature back into the language classroom is not, then, an attempt to go back in time. Rather, knowledge of literary texts helps students become better language learners, and provides them with skills that are increasingly necessary in the contemporary globalised world. We propose the following classification of the primary benefits of bringing literature into the language class, as supported by the research and policy documents consulted:

- **Literature enhances foreign language learning:** research has shown that when appropriate student-centred exercises on literature are put into practice in the language classroom, students make more progress in their language learning:  
It is clear that literature does have something very special to offer to language learning. (...) It combines attention to meaning with attention to form. (...) It is motivating and engaging (Paran 2008: 70).
- **Authentic materials increase student engagement with language learning:** literature fosters motivation because 'literature provides not only a genuine context for communication; it also gives pleasure by engaging the emotions' (Hill 1986: 9). Also, 'literature's contents may well be truer to life and more relevant to learners than the typical textbook topics' (Sell 2005: 15).
- **It provokes discussion of difficult ethical issues:** literature presents the student with human relationships, challenges and dilemmas to be explored and analysed. The study of literature in the language class 'serves many more educational purposes – intellectual, moral and emotional, linguistic and cultural– than the purely aesthetic' (Council of Europe 2014: 65).
- **It links with internationalisation, fosters intercultural awareness and provides reflection on diversity and inclusion:** literature offers opportunities to experience different cultures in context. Thus, language classes take on their full potential in the project of cultural mediation: 'Language learning helps learners to avoid stereotyping individuals, to develop curiosity and openness to otherness and to discover other cultures' (Council of Europe 2008: 29).
- **It develops important employability skills:** as the job market becomes more and more internationalised, students need to be prepared to engage with different cultural contexts:  
At present, students who are extensive travellers demand a different approach to the cultural dimension, which should prepare them to meet and interact with otherness taken in its changing multiplicity (Matos 2012: 7).  
An approach to language learning that enriches students' intercultural awareness will develop important employability skills, preparing students who are enthusiastic and perceptive travellers to engage with cultural diversity:  
Literature written in the target language (...) may give learners insight into other cultures, thus preparing them to act competently and appropriately in future dealings with representatives from those cultures (Sell 2005: 92).

According to a recent report, *Born Global*, produced by the British Academy (2016) on language skills for employability, in an increasingly competitive job market it is essential that graduates acquire soft skills to communicate with other cultures. The study of languages through literature inherently develops these skills, as specified in the subject benchmark statement:

The study of languages enables students to understand the similarities and differences between cultures, in the broadest sense of high culture, popular culture and the customs and practices of everyday life. In this sense it is inherently intercultural. (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015)

Literature is an ideal instrument to provide the context to engage with the cultures of the countries where a language is spoken, at the same time as it fosters important skills such as intercultural awareness, problem-solving abilities and critical thinking. These are essential skills for the formation of the ideal transnational graduate of the future, as defined by the British Academy report.

### **3. The *Litinclass* website: bringing expertise together**

In order to address the challenges and opportunities of exploiting the teaching of literature for all of these purposes, we devised a project to research and explore methodologies in this field. A key tool of the project is the *Litinclass* website, <https://litinclass.wordpress.com/>. This website, aimed at MFL teachers and researchers, both at school and university levels, pools existing resources and also offers original materials derived from our research-led teaching. The website includes the rationale for creating the site and provides links to studies, which highlight the benefits of bringing literature into foreign language studies. It provides a range of activities, which exemplify these benefits and links them to various skills. The project is ambitious, wanting to present multilingual resources, linking them more directly to employability skills in particular and increasing the number of collaborators from different countries.

An example of research-led teaching was the successful curriculum review process that took place in an Advanced Portuguese Language module at the University of Liverpool during the academic year 2015/16. More literary texts were introduced in the module, including the reading of a contemporary Lusophone novel. Student activities ranged from text and lexical analysis and creative writing, to the discussion of sensitive issues and even a Skype conversation in Portuguese with the author. Student feedback on the module mentioned that “it’s fascinating to learn about the complex interracial relationships of the time” as learned in the novel; and another student stressed that “it is especially appreciated the part of the class focused around a literary text, which helped both our language and knowledge of Portuguese culture.” Thus, the students acknowledged that literature helped them develop intercultural awareness, which will make them more sensitive when facing real life situations in their graduate and professional future. Reading the novel, for example, generated more understanding, empathy and sensitivity, which were manifested in the subsequent analysis of Lusophone culture and current issues in some newspaper articles and other texts. It also fostered initiative and a more autonomous response, initiated by the students themselves rather than having to be teacher-led.

### **4. Conclusion**

Teaching literature in the modern foreign languages classroom means giving students a profound insight into the cultural worlds of the languages they are learning. This is particularly important at a time when we are moving towards offering greater levels of internationalisation in education and

post-graduate jobs. The study of literature brings to the classroom employability skills, which underpin professional competence, such as sensitivity to ethical questions specific to a particular culture, critical thinking, respect for cultural values and appropriate responses to these values.

To this end, the *Litinclass* research group will continue to work on creating and sharing resources through the *Litinclass* website (<https://litinclass.wordpress.com/>). The project is in its early stages but results have been promising. We intend to develop more examples taken from classroom practice, to demonstrate further the link between intercultural awareness derived from literature, and the enhancement of specific employability skills.

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