

# The Role of Literature and Culture in Second and Foreign Language Pedagogy: a Redundancy or a Blessing?

With ongoing, far-reaching and hotly contested reforms across the curricula and at all levels of Luxembourg's system of education, a deep sense of unease and alarm has started to emerge among teachers and students alike regarding the future position of literature and culture in second and foreign language pedagogy in general and ELT (English Language Teaching) in particular.

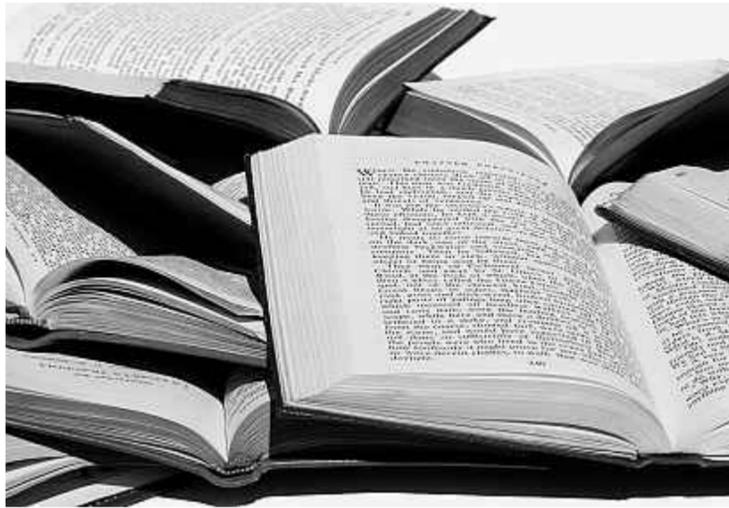
The ensuing article is aimed at underlining the fact that integrating literature and culture in its diverse forms does not hamper English language teaching. On the contrary, it can enrich the communicative approach, hence contributing to the enhancement of linguistic competences as well as involving the individual language learner as the focus of the learning process. What is more, literature in its manifold manifestations enables learners better to understand both themselves and their place in the human narrative.

In his disturbing dystopia *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley has the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning (the DHC) enthuse over the principles of mass production and efficiency, which have at last been applied to biology-

"Standard men and women; in uniform batches. The whole of a small factory staffed with the products of a single bokanofskified egg."<sup>1</sup>

At times, the approach we as a society seem to be taking to education might well remind one of Huxley's DHC, only this time there seems to be a driving trend for the principle of mass production and 'efficiency' to be applied to education in general and the teaching of languages in particular. Increasingly syllabi and curricula appear to be geared towards rendering a given language useful and convenient when it comes to dealing with a wide range of practical tasks, the most important of which is communication.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with acquiring the linguistic competence for effective communication and the ability to use language to address a variety of tasks at school, university or later on in the world of work and business. Indeed, nowadays it might well strike one as a tru-



"A deep sense of unease and alarm has started to emerge among teachers and students alike regarding the future position of literature and culture in second and foreign language pedagogy in general and ELT (English Language Teaching) in particular"

Photo: pixelio.de

ism to stress the importance of learning English, especially for students who envisage university studies.

The reasons for studying English are varied, numerous, and absolutely convincing. Indeed, even a cursory look at the entrance requirements of institutions of higher education at home and abroad, a brief listen-in to debates among European politicians in Strasbourg and Brussels, or economic forums in Switzerland will suffice to clear away any doubts as regards the validity of comments such as:

English is

- a world language
- the language of international business, economics and politics
- the language of Academia
- to name but a few.

So, it did come as something of an unpleasant and irritating surprise when the original groundbreaking plan in the planned reform of the secondary school system, designed to make it impossible to drop English in the *Examen de fin d'études secondaires*, quite simply vanished. The original initiative had struck one as truly brave, innovative and well-founded; its abrupt and rash scrapping has left a bitter aftertaste as well as ample room for concern as to what else might be at stake.

Given the undoubted key role of the English language both at home and abroad, there is nothing wrong

with emphasizing the need for linguistic competence. Problems start to emerge, however, when the linguistic competence of a given language is pursued for ends or reasons that risk ignoring the literary and cultural realities that inform and shape that very language. Given our fast moving times, there is a widespread trend amongst the practically-minded to consider literature and culture as useless luxuries. It is an open secret and it is truly alarming that in our times dominated by burning issues of economic growth and economic or financial crises, the humanities (i.e. subjects like philosophy, the arts and history) should be expected to take the back seat, especially in the education of our youth. Not seldom do students who take a keen interest in the humanities find themselves confronted with the need to defend their subjects of choice against the embarrassing and condescending attitude taken by those who value science, mathematics or economics so much higher because they deal with what can be measured and be used in 'real' life.

There are those to whom there is no apparent and direct usefulness to the study of literary texts; according to them, literature is an idle occupation that makes no economic sense. To quote from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'Nowadays the people

know the price of everything and the value of nothing.'<sup>2</sup>

Maybe, in our fast moving, rapidly changing times, it might make sense to take the time to ponder Wilde's prophetic warning: "Thought is degraded by its constant association with practice. We live in the age of the overworked, and the undereducated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid ..."

As a matter of fact, Our Ford in *Brave New World*, 'who claims that History is bunk'<sup>3</sup> and whose practically-minded approach to life and business makes of him the god-like spirit driving Huxley's shocking utilitarian dystopia, seems to remain well alive and kicking in our time and age.

To those who would thus gladly deny the value of literature and culture, one could respond by stressing the 'usefulness' of literature and culture as, among other things, a means of training and enhancing language skills.

Take a literary text, for instance; as long as it is carefully chosen, according to the level of the language learners, it can function as a starting point for setting a wide range of tasks that may be truly conducive to practising language activities in the four skills, namely listening, reading, writing, speaking. What is more, tasks that require the student to be creative in their exploration of a literary text by introducing a 'new' character, for instance, or a different ending to a narrative, may well tap into hitherto unknown imaginative resources or innovative talents, thus engaging learners in the process of exploring both the target language and their individual resourcefulness. Ultimately, by integrating literature and culture, teaching a language becomes a means of widening learners' linguistic resources as well as enabling them to position themselves in a multicultural and multilingual world. This is also a major reason why literary texts have become a key component of the so-called CLILL or Content Led Integrated Language Learning approach in language teaching.

Besides the 'usefulness' of fictional and literary elements in language teaching highlighted above, there is another kind of 'usefulness' to introdu-

cing learners to the literature and culture informing their target language. Though much less visible, it is much more profound in its impact. It is not a commodity to be bought or sold; it comes without a price tag, and yet it is priceless. At a time when the world is fast becoming one multifaceted interconnected global web – shaped, or better still, propelled by instantaneous and global electronic connections, it is cultural fluency that has become at least as vital as linguistic fluency. In fact, the mutually enhancing interdependence of cultural and linguistic fluency can hardly be denied or ignored. Cultural fluency involves the open-mindedness that springs from the central recognition, generated by the study of literature and culture in their multifaceted manifestations, that beneath all the differences and beyond all 'the sound and fury signifying nothing' (*Macbeth*, V,5), we partake of what Nobel Prize Laureate, Nadine Gordimer, terms "the ceaseless adventure of man." (*The Essential Gesture*)

As teachers on a frontierless land of globalization we cannot afford to ignore man's literary and cultural heritage.

Let us close with Ray Bradbury reflecting on his *Fire Chief's* disturbing prediction halfway through *Fahrenheit 451*. It is a startling warning and has to do with books being burned without matches or fire.

"Because you don't have to burn books, do you, if the world starts to fill up with non-readers, non-learners, non-knowers? [...] All is not lost, of course. There is still time if we judge teachers, students and parents, hold them accountable on the same scale [...] if we make everyone responsible for quality."<sup>4</sup>

Josiane Weis, President of „Association des Enseignants d'Anglais“, English Teacher at Lycée Michel-Rodange

1. *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley, Flamingo, Modern Classic, p.5
2. *from Nothing ... Except My Genius*, Oscar Wilde
3. *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley, p.30
4. *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury Harper Collins Publishers, p.183

## Stellungnahme des Historischen Seminars der Universität zur Debatte um die Reform des Sekundarschulunterrichts

Als Angehörige des Laboratoire d'histoire der Universität Luxemburg verfolgen wir mit Sorge die aktuelle Debatte um die Reform des Sekundarschulwesens im Großherzogtum Luxemburg. Die Schärfe der Polemik ist einer konstruktiven Lösung abträglich. Dabei sind sich alle Diskutanten über das Ziel einer solchen Reform völlig einig: der Unterricht soll verbessert werden. In dem Sinne scheint es uns fruchtbringender und dringender geboten, über Lernziele und Unterrichtsmethoden zu diskutieren, statt sich an der Stundenzahl einzelner Fächer festzubeißen.

Wir möchten uns an dieser Stelle lediglich dazu äußern, was wir aus unserer Perspektive und aufgrund unserer Erfahrung als Ergebnis einer Reform des Sekundarschulunterrichts erwar-

ten. Als Forschende und Lehrende des Fachs Geschichte an der Universität Luxemburg sind wir in hohem Maße daran interessiert, dass die ehemaligen Sekundarschülerinnen und -schüler, die ihren Bildungsweg bei uns fortsetzen, alle Voraussetzungen mitbringen, die sie befähigen, ihr Studium erfolgreich zu absolvieren. Dass die Studierenden von einem guten Geschichtsunterricht profitieren konnten, der ihnen von engagierten Lehrerinnen und Lehrern erteilt wurde, ist nur eine dieser Bedingungen.

Unsere Studienanfänger sollten die Fähigkeit mitbringen, das Lehrangebot, das ihnen gemacht wird, kritisch zu reflektieren und für ihren Erkenntnisgewinn fruchtbar zu machen. Hierbei ist ein historisches Vorwissen, das ihnen bereits in der Sekundarschule

vermittelt wurde, wichtig und notwendig. Darüber hinaus sollten unsere Studierenden gelernt haben, Dokumente kritisch zu lesen, Zusammenhänge darzustellen, eigene Standpunkte zu entwickeln und über die sprachlichen und sozialen Fähigkeiten verfügen, diese gegenüber ihren Mitstudierenden und den Lehrenden zu vertreten. Sie sollten selbstständig arbeiten und sich ihre Zeit so einteilen können, dass sie ihre Studienleistungen fristgerecht mit Erfolg erbringen. Und schließlich sollten sie öffentliche Debatten über gesellschaftlich oder politisch bedeutsame Fragen aufmerksam verfolgen und mit den Inhalten ihres Studiums verknüpfen können. Dies sind unsere Vorstellungen, die sich mit den allgemeinen Zielen der aktuellen Reform aber auch des Memorandums der ALEH (Associ-

ation luxembourgeoise des enseignants d'histoire) decken.

Keineswegs alle unsere Studierenden bringen die genannten Fähigkeiten mit, wenn sie an die Universität kommen. Aus unserer Sicht ist es dringend erforderlich, den Anteil der studierfähigen Absolventinnen und Absolventen der Sekundarschulen zu erhöhen. Wir unterstützen daher alle Bestrebungen, die zu einer erfolgreichen Vermittlung der genannten Fähigkeiten an den Sekundarschulen des Landes führen.

Wir sind der Auffassung, dass der Geschichtsunterricht für sämtliche Schulabgänger von Bedeutung ist, auch für diejenigen, die sich nicht dem Geschichtsstudium zuwenden, da der Geschichtsunterricht auf Quellenstudium aufbauend analytische und synthetische Kompetenzen der jungen

Menschen fördert, die in vielen Berufssparten verlangt sind. Ebenso stärkt er die Befähigung zur kritischen Reflexion gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhänge, die für ein demokratisches Zusammenleben von Menschen verschiedener Herkunft und unterschiedlicher Auffassungen notwendig ist.

Die Mitglieder des Laboratoire d'histoire der Universität Luxemburg: Andrea Binsfeld, Marc Birchen, Elisabeth Boesen, Laure Caregari, Norbert Franz, Thorsten Fuchshuber, Thierry Grosbois, Eva Jullien, Sonja Kmec, Thomas Kolnberger, Bernhard Kreutz, Anne-Katrin Kunde, René Leboutte, Jean-Paul Lehnens, Benoît Majerus, Michel Margue, Sophie Neuenkirch, Michel Pauly, Pit Peporte, Hérold Pettiau, Arnaud Sauer, Denis Scuto, Gianna Thommes, Martin Uhrmacher, Renée Wagener