

Recontextualising Literature in Modern EFL Pedagogy

Septhia Irnanda^{1*}, Cut Faizah², Cut Mulia Zuhra³

¹²³Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Universitas Serambi Mekkah,
Aceh, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: septhia.irnanda@serambimekkah.ac.id

Abstract. *The role of literature in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum has shifted significantly over the last century, moving from a central position in classical education to being marginalized by functional, communicative approaches. Recently, however, literature has re-emerged as a vital resource that engages learner identity more deeply than standard textbooks. This study employs a qualitative secondary research design, using a narrative literature review and document analysis to synthesize historical frameworks and modern pedagogical theories. The discussion identifies key implementation challenges, such as linguistic complexity, cultural alienation, and material selection. Despite these hurdles, the study finds that literature offers unique advantages, including the provision of authentic social input, the development of emotional empathy, and the promotion of higher-order critical thinking. To translate these benefits into practice, the paper proposes a strategic framework for educators. This includes assessing specific ESL or EFL classroom contexts, utilizing local cultural schemata as scaffolding to reduce cognitive load, and balancing intensive analysis with extensive reading habits. Ultimately, the study concludes that recontextualizing literature through these strategies helps students move beyond basic fluency to become confident, culturally competent communicators.*

Keywords: *EFL Pedagogy, Literary Integration, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Global-to-Local Contextualization, Authentic Materials*

1. Introduction

The integration of literature into the EFL curriculum has never been static. In the early 20th century, dominated by the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), literature was not merely a resource; it was the curriculum itself (Khatib et al., 2011). As Marckwardt (1978), as cited in Aswathi (2022), famously observed, "When English was studied as a foreign language, all roads led to Shakespeare." During the early stages of English pedagogy, the study of canonical literature was considered the ultimate destination and primary vehicle for linguistic mastery. In this era, the ultimate measure of a learner's proficiency was not their conversational fluency, but rather their ability to navigate and analyse the complex works of classical authors like Shakespeare.

However, the mid-20th century witnessed a radical shift (Khatib et al., 2011). The rise of Applied Linguistics, Audiolingualism, and eventually Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970s and 80s prioritised functional and useful language over aesthetic or philosophical exploration. Literature was deemed too complex, too archaic, and too unscientific for the practical needs of global communication. Khatib et al. (2011, p. 203-205) listed eight specific problems literature can cause in language classes, including syntax, lexical, phonetics and phonology, semantics, selection of materials, literary concepts and notions, literature and academic English, and cultural barriers.

In the modern era, we are seeing a correction of this trajectory. Today's scholars argue that the "sterility" of purely functional textbooks fails to engage the learner's identity. Literature is re-emerging not as a set of dusty relics, but as a "promising

resource" (Khatib et al., 2011). This paper argues that recontextualising literature for the modern classroom requires a balance between acknowledging implementation problems and leveraging literature's distinctive qualities.

2. Method

The present study employs a qualitative secondary research design, specifically utilising a narrative literature review and document analysis approach. Rather than empirical data collection through subjects, this study focuses on the critical synthesis of existing pedagogical theories and historical frameworks concerning the role of literature in English Language Teaching (ELT).

3. Results and Discussions

Problems of Implementations

Despite its potential, using literature in the EFL classroom is fraught with difficulties that require strategic management.

The most immediate hurdle is the linguistic complexity of literary works. Traditional literature often employs non-standard syntax. As noted by Vaishnav (2024), this can lead to cognitive overload, where the student spends so much energy decoding individual words that the meaning of the narrative is lost. Furthermore, phonological and semantic shifts over centuries mean that even when a student recognises a word, its 17th-century meaning may differ from its modern usage, leading to profound misunderstandings.

Moreover, literature is a cultural artefact. For an EFL learner, a text is often saturated with social nuances, idioms, and historical references that are completely foreign. Affendi & Aziz (2020) suggest that this "contextual unfamiliarity" can lead to student alienation. If a student in Indonesia cannot relate to the social hierarchies of a British Victorian novel, for example, the text becomes a barrier rather than a bridge.

Finally, there is often a misconception that literature is only for those in the humanities. Students in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tracks, such as medicine or engineering, may view literature as a distraction. Additionally, the task of material selection is daunting. Teachers must balance age-appropriateness, gender sensitivity, and linguistic level. Ilyas & Afzal (2021) emphasise that without a clear criterion for selection, the use of literature can become haphazard and demotivating.

The Distinctive Qualities

If the challenges are so significant, why include literature at all? The answer lies in the unique pedagogical affordances that only literary texts can provide.

Standard EFL textbooks often present dialogues that are grammatically perfect but socially hollow. Literature, particularly modern drama and fiction, provides authentic input. It shows language in operation, complete with hesitation, subtext, and emotional weight. Mandarani & Munir (2021) argue that this exposure is essential for developing Intercultural Communicative Competence, as it shows how native speakers navigate real-world conflicts and relationships.

Secondly, language learning is often treated as a purely cognitive task, yet successful communication is deeply emotional. Literature engages the "whole person." By identifying with characters, students develop empathy. Recent studies by Ilankumaran & Deepa (2022) demonstrate that learners who engage with literature show higher levels

of emotional resilience and a better sociolinguistic competence, or knowing not just how to speak, but when and with what tone.

Furthermore, literature encourages literate thinking (Langer, 1997). Unlike a factual report, a poem or a short story is open to interpretation. This ambiguity forces students to move beyond the literal level and engage in higher-order thinking: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Hasnani et al. (2023) found that when students are challenged to interpret literary meanings, their ability to think critically in their native language also improves, creating a bilingual cognitive benefit.

The research conducted by Mart (2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b) focuses on the practical advantages of integrating literature into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. A major theme in these publications is the rejection of the traditional separation between language and literature. Mart (2018a) argues that this division is an artificial barrier that can limit the linguistic development of students. Instead, he suggests that literary texts provide a more effective and comprehensive learning environment than standard textbooks, which helps to optimise the overall learning process (Mart, 2018b).

In terms of specific skill development, Mart's studies emphasise that literature is a highly effective tool for improving oral communication. He notes that literature-based instruction is particularly beneficial for upper-intermediate students because it introduces complex themes that require more advanced language use (Mart, 2017). His research into speaking skills indicates that discussing literary topics creates a natural environment where students feel encouraged to express complicated thoughts (Mart, 2019a). After comparing various teaching methods, including form-focused and content-based approaches, Mart (2019b) concluded that a combined methodology is the most efficient way to improve communicative competence.

Furthermore, Mart highlights the psychological and motivational benefits of using literature in the classroom. He suggests that literary works are more authentic than traditional pedagogical materials because they allow students to develop a personal connection with the content (Mart, 2018b). Unlike the simple dialogues often found in textbooks, literature requires students to think deeply and negotiate different meanings. This level of engagement leads to better language acquisition because students become more intellectually involved in the lesson (Mart, 2019b). Ultimately, Mart's work demonstrates that literature is an essential resource for increasing both the accuracy and the confidence of EFL learners.

Strategic Frameworks

To turn the theories of including literature into practice in the ELT classroom, there are at least three general principles that need to be followed by English teachers; assessing the classroom contexts, making use of the local language, and balancing the intensive and extensive readings.

First, it is important to recognise if the classroom is an EFL or ESL because it dictates whether literature should serve as a primary instructional material or a supplementary resource to enhance motivation and cultural awareness. In ESL contexts, such as in Malaysia, India, or the Philippines, English often has an official status and is used in government, media, and education. In these societies, students have high exposure to the language outside the classroom. Therefore, literature can be used as a primary source for language development. According to Sivapalan et al. (2020), literature in ESL settings helps students navigate complex sociocultural identities. Because these learners already possess a functional command of English, literary texts allow them to achieve

higher-level proficiency and move toward "native-like" fluency by exploring nuances in tone, register, and social context. In contrast, in EFL contexts like Indonesia, Japan, or Turkey, English is primarily learned for international communication or academic purposes rather than daily interaction. In these settings, exposure to authentic English is often limited to the classroom. Consequently, literature usually serves as a supplementary resource. Bobkina and Dominguez (2014) argue that for EFL learners, the main goal of literature is to provide authentic input that standard textbooks lack. Because the linguistic barrier is higher in EFL settings, teachers often use literature to provide variety and increase student motivation rather than using it as the sole basis for the curriculum.

In the Indonesian context, English is officially categorised as a foreign language (EFL), which presents unique pedagogical challenges. According to Irnanda (2021), many Indonesian students begin secondary education with very limited vocabulary because English is not a compulsory subject in primary schools. This "vocabulary gap" makes it difficult for students to engage with authentic materials. Irnanda and Sarair (2022) further explain that these linguistic barriers often lead to high levels of anxiety and a lack of confidence in speaking. Consequently, the role of literature in such a context is not just linguistic, but psychological. By integrating literature that resonates with the learners' cultural background, educators can reduce the foreignness of the language, transforming the text from a source of anxiety into a tool for engagement.

Secondly, the implementation of literary works in the EFL classroom, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, requires a strategic approach to overcome the lack of linguistic preparedness. According to Afandi et al. (2022), English instruction in many Indonesian schools often fails to run optimally due to a lack of awareness regarding how literature can facilitate learning. Their research demonstrates that when traditional literary forms, such as fairy tales, are integrated into the curriculum, there is a significant increase in student performance. This improvement is largely attributed to the use of familiar narrative structures which allow students to focus on vocabulary mastery rather than struggling with complex, alien concepts. By utilizing stories that align with the students' existing conceptual framework, educators provide a form of scaffolding that makes the acquisition of new English lexis more manageable and effective.

However, the transition to a literature-based curriculum is often hindered by specific pedagogical and systemic challenges. A systematic review by Affendi and Aziz (2020) identifies several critical issues in the teaching of English literature, including the linguistic complexity of the texts and the lack of cultural relevance to the learners. When the distance between the student's background and the literary text is too great, the material becomes an obstacle rather than a tool for growth. To mitigate these issues, it is essential to select materials that offer cultural resonance. By leveraging the students' prior knowledge—or schema—teachers can reduce the cognitive load. This localized approach ensures that the literature serves as a supportive framework, allowing learners to build confidence as they map new linguistic labels onto familiar cultural concepts.

In short, the success of literature in the EFL context depends on the teacher's ability to bridge the gap between the learner's current proficiency and the demands of the text. As shown by Afandi et al. (2022), when literature is made accessible through appropriate scaffolding and familiar themes, it leads to a measurable increase in learning outcomes. Integrating these findings into a broader pedagogical strategy allows for a more inclusive classroom where literature is used not as a distant academic subject, but as a practical and engaging medium for language development.

Thirdly, the integration of extensive reading (ER) into the literature classroom offers a robust framework for enhancing both linguistic proficiency and literary appreciation. Unlike intensive reading, which focuses on the minute deconstruction of short texts, ER involves students reading large quantities of material that align with their interests and proficiency levels. According to Nation and Waring (2019), this approach is fundamental for language acquisition as it provides the necessary repetition of vocabulary and grammatical structures in meaningful contexts. By engaging with literature extensively, students move beyond rote memorisation and begin to develop a natural feel for the language, which is essential for reaching advanced levels of fluency.

The linguistic benefits of this method are further supported by meta-analytic evidence. Liu and Zhang (2018) demonstrate that extensive reading has a significant positive effect on English vocabulary learning. Their findings suggest that the incidental acquisition of words through large-scale reading is more effective for long-term retention than traditional direct instruction. In a literature class, this means that as students encounter recurring themes and stylistic devices across various texts, they reinforce their mental lexicon without the cognitive fatigue often associated with isolated word lists.

In the modern pedagogical landscape, the medium of extensive reading has also evolved. Janah et al. (2022) highlight the shift toward digital extensive reading in the Indonesian context, noting that digital platforms provide learners with greater access to diverse literary resources. This accessibility is crucial for fostering a reading habit outside the classroom, which is a key predictor of academic success. Furthermore, recent research by Azizi et al. (2024) suggests that combining extensive reading with extensive viewing, such as watching film adaptations of literary works, significantly enhances students' literary appreciation and thematic knowledge. This multimodal approach allows learners to visualise complex narratives, thereby deepening their emotional and intellectual connection to the literature.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, integrating literature into English language teaching marks a move away from mechanical learning toward a more complete and human-centered approach. Although there are clear challenges in implementation, such as linguistic difficulty, cultural distance, and school-level misunderstandings, these problems can be managed with the right strategies. By evaluating the classroom environment, using the students' own cultural knowledge to help them understand new texts, and balancing deep analysis with wide-scale reading, teachers can turn stories and poems into powerful learning tools. Ultimately, literature offers more than just grammar and vocabulary practice as it helps students develop critical thinking, emotional strength, and the ability to communicate across different cultures. In today's globalized world, giving learners the skills to understand literary expression ensures they become more than just students; they become confident and capable communicators.

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