

# USING LITERARY TEXTS TO IMPROVE LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE: PROJECTIONS FOR GREEK STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH AND FRENCH <sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to make an overview of the effects of using literary texts in foreign language teaching environment in general and, in particular, to improve the language skills of Greek learners of English and French. Based on existing literary texts and prior knowledge of how literary texts help language learning and other aspects, it outlines the predictions of how literary texts can improve vocabulary, grammar, cultural understanding and critical thinking skills in Greek classrooms during the teaching of English and French. Although no research has been conducted for some time on this topic, this study provides a road map for exploring how literary texts can transform language learning according to previous studies and opinions and sets out practical perspectives on the impact of literary texts on foreign language teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is part of author's PhD project devoted on this problem and further, a school based investigation is to be conducted.



## Introduction

In recent years, the potential of literary texts to enhance language learning has attracted attention and a growing number of educators are exploring the integration of literary texts into language curricula. Scholars such as Krashen (1982), Brumfit & Carter (1986) and Kramsch (1993) have long argued that literary texts provide authentic linguistic input that stimulates both language acquisitions, offering rich context for language use and cultural understanding. Similarly, Collie and Slater (1987) highlighted the dual role of literary texts in engaging learners with both language and culture, emphasizing how exposure to literary texts can motivate students to explore language in meaningful contexts. Although there were studies emphasizing that literary texts could enhance language learning and also other aspects language learning has traditionally focused on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary without the use of literary texts. In recent years, however, teachers have turned to literary texts as a way of developing language skills. For English and French language learners in Greek schools, literary texts is a unique way to immerse themselves in language and culture, and as proposed by Ghosn (2002) to stimulate higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. In this study, I aim to test these suggested benefits in practice and investigate how literary texts influence the language learning experience of Greek students learning English and French. Using a carefully designed questionnaire, I will analyze student feedback on some specific areas: language learning experience, cultural immersion, learning through literary texts, critical thinking and content difficulty, assessment of language development. This research will allow us to provide informed recommendations for integrating literary texts into language curricula based on actual classroom responses according to the feedback of the questionnaire and to the suggestions of participants.

This article summarises how the use of literary texts can improve the language skills of Greek learners of English and French. Drawing on established research and theoretical frameworks, it predicts how literary texts can influence students' vocabulary, grammar, cultural sensitivity and critical thinking skills and addresses potential challenges. The present article examines the role of literary texts in language learning, particularly among learners of English, and presents findings from both theoretical research and practical classroom applications.

## **Literary texts as catalysts for language learning - theoretical foundations**

### **Sociocultural theory**

Vygotsky (1978) states that literary texts function as a cultural artifact and allows students to understand not only the language but also the cultural context in which it is used. Vygotsky's theory argues that interaction with culturally rich material enhances the learning experience. According to this opinion with which I also agree and having faced it also many times in my classrooms as French teacher, I expect results similar to this direction. Through literary texts, culturally rich material is provided to the students such as that not only they can engage themselves with the regional cultures, but also their learning experience can be enhanced with this exposure to the different cultures and additionally develop a greater motivation for language learning and knowledge.

In the following years, Krashen (1982) and Brumfit & Carter (1986) suggested that literary texts provide rich and authentic linguistic material that facilitates language acquisition. These studies suggest that literary texts not only introduce students to new vocabulary and structures but also offer context for authentic language use. This leads us to expect that literary texts could play a similarly pivotal role in Greek classrooms, serving as a dynamic tool to motivate students to learn English and French. Additionally Collie and Slater (1987) argue that literary texts expose learners to both language and culture and motivate them to learn. In this context, Greek-speaking students are expected to develop a cultural understanding of English and French-speaking countries through exposure to such literary texts gaining insights into the social and cultural fabric of these regions.

### **Intercultural and sociolinguistic competence**

Many studies have dealt with the development of intercultural and sociolinguistic competence through literary texts. Many authors analyzed the contribution of literary texts to linguistic and cultural education. Byram, M. (1990) focused on intercultural communication and language education through literary texts. Kramersch, C. (1993) in her work *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* contributed to the study of the relationship between language and culture and how

literary texts help in the development of intercultural competence, addressing these concepts in her work. Similarly, Byram (1997) suggests that through the study of literary texts, students are expected to develop intercultural competence through exposure to texts that reflect different social norms and cultural backgrounds. Guilherme (2002) emphasizes critical intercultural education, which links language, identity, and culture. According to the aforementioned studies, literary texts are expected to act as bridges that allow students to apply language in culturally relevant contexts. Through literary texts students are exposed to different worldviews and social norms and develop sociolinguistic competence. Literary texts allow students to encounter dialects, idiomatic expressions and cultural references necessary for language acquisition.

Following this direction, I expect that Greek students will finally also engage themselves to the cultural worlds of English and French speaking countries. I expect that students will expose themselves to the different world views and social norms of the books containing English and French stories and will have the opportunity to explore the historical background of the mentioned countries and the historical events that lead to today's cultural mixtures in those countries. It will also be an opportunity for exposing themselves to the cultures of all those countries and have a first opinion of the differences and similarities of their own cultures. They will also have the opportunity to be a member of a new world full of regional dialects, idiomatic expressions, religions, politics, historical backgrounds and various cultural references that can contribute to language acquisition. This can develop their sociolinguistic competence as well and can be more ready to this direction if they go to these countries.

## **Impact on Vocabulary and Grammar**

### *Vocabulary development*

According to a study by Lazar (1993), exposure to the rich and varied language found in literary texts is expected to increase students' vocabulary. The wide variety of expressions, idioms and descriptive phrases encountered in literary works provides students with a practical vocabulary beyond what they learn from school textbooks.

The advanced language sentences of literary texts are expected to develop students' syntactic awareness.

Reading literary texts allows students to observe grammar in action and develop their ability to construct more advanced sentences in their own writing and speaking. Exposure to a variety of sentence patterns in literary texts helps students to internalise grammatical rules more effectively than traditional methods, and Duff and Maley (2007) emphasise the importance of authentic texts for developing grammatical skills.

### **Developing critical thinking skills**

Engaging students in literary analysis will develop their critical thinking and analytical skills. Through class discussion and written reflection on themes, depiction of characters and authorial intentions, students are expected to develop their ability to interpret and understand texts. This is in line with the findings of Duff and Maley (2007), which highlight the cognitive benefits of literary texts-based learning.

### **Increased awareness and sensitivity towards cultural understanding**

Literary texts provide insight into the social and cultural context of language use. As Byram (1997) points out sociolinguistic competence is expected to develop as students gain a deeper understanding of cultural differences. Exposure to culturally rich texts is expected to enable students to understand the nuances of language use in different contexts, in particular vernacular and vernacular language, idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Students will become more aware of historical, social and cultural nuances through reading traditional literary works in English and French. Finally as Kramsch (1993) suggests, exposure to different viewpoints will develop empathy and intercultural communication skills.

### **Challenges and constraints**

*More advanced content and language level*

One of the anticipated challenges is that some students, especially those with lower language skills, may struggle with the advanced vocabulary and sentences

found in literary texts. Many students, particularly those at lower levels of proficiency, struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary, advanced sentence structures and cultural references and cannot easily understand them without guidance. This challenge may initially discourage students, but it is hoped that teacher support (e.g. dictionaries, guided reading and discussion) will alleviate these difficulties. I expect that this could also be improved in the end of this research because it could help such to the evaluation of existing practices facing these challenges as to the recommendation and proposal of other methods for facing these challenges.

### **Challenges for the teacher**

Teachers often find it difficult to select texts that are interesting and appropriate for their students' language level. They also find it difficult to find a balance between literary texts and other learning materials. I expect that this research could help them in this direction and may be proposed methods of finding appropriate texts for their students according to their interests and language level. Moreover, I expect that will also be proposed other learning materials and suggestions on how to balance them with literary texts. Especially in Greek classrooms of English and French, there is a lot of space for improvement and Greece is far behind in these methods.

### **Cultural barriers**

Another challenge is the cultural distance between students' experiences and the foreign cultural background of the texts. However, with appropriate guidance from the teacher and classroom activities that frame these cultural references, it is expected that students will gradually overcome these barriers and find the whole thing relevant. For example, various stories in these books could present cultural elements and facts that come in contradiction with the religious beliefs and opinions with many students. Moreover, these literary texts could contain critics and opinions of the writers that could contradict to students' opinions and religious beliefs.

## Methodology

The research employs a questionnaire distributed to students enrolled in English and French language courses across various Greek schools. The primary aim is to evaluate the role of literary texts in enhancing linguistic skills. The questionnaire comprised both closed and open-ended questions designed to assess benefits of literary texts as vocabulary acquisition, cultural understanding, and critical thinking according to the opinions of students. A total of 20 students participate, with 10 from English classes and 10 from French classes.

The data will be collected anonymously over a period of 2 weeks, ensuring a diverse range of responses from students of different language proficiency levels. Responses will be analyzed quantitatively to identify patterns in language development and qualitatively to explore students' personal experiences with literary texts in their language studies.

## Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on students' experiences with literary texts. The data will be gathered and analyzed using digital tools like SPSS for quantitative data and NVivo for qualitative data. The analysis will involve descriptive statistics to summarize the sample, along with advanced statistical techniques to address the research questions.

## Construction of the questionnaire

For the questionnaire to be constructed, I leaned to four basic elements that according to the aforementioned theories I agree with. Without doubt, using literary texts in the FLT classroom is of great benefit. I prepared a list of questions in order to find out whether learners of French and English believe that these are the benefits they

expect to enjoy. The elements considered as basic advantages when/if using literary texts in language learning are:

**1. Improved Vocabulary:** Literary texts provide various advantages as a tool for language learning like exposure to a wide range of vocabulary, including idiomatic expressions and advanced sentence structures, which traditional textbooks may lack.

**2. Cultural Immersion:** Students gain a deeper understanding of the culture associated with the language they are learning, enhancing their intercultural competence.

**3. Critical Thinking Development:** Analysing characters, themes, and authorial intentions encourages students to engage with the material on a deeper level, fostering critical thinking and analytical skills.

**4. Motivation and Engagement:** Well-chosen texts can improve language learning experience sparking interest and motivating students to learn by connecting with themes that resonate with their own experiences or pique their curiosity about foreign cultures.

This is why the questionnaire has been constructed with these aforementioned basic elements (language learning experience, cultural immersion, learning through literary texts, critical thinking and content difficulty, assessment of language development).

This structure will allow us to collect numerical data for statistical analysis, as well as more detailed personal accounts of students' learning experiences.

### **Example questionnaire's questions**

- 1) Language learning experience: *Do you enjoy reading literary texts (e.g., novels, poems, short stories) in English/French?*
- 2) Learning through literary texts: *Has reading literary texts helped you improve your language skills?*
- 3) Critical thinking and content difficulty: *Do you think the literary texts used are appropriate for your language level?*

### **Suggestions and assumptions of how the use of literary texts in language learning could be improved**



Based on theories and some teachers' suggestions, it is recommended that language instructors:

**Integrate culturally relevant texts:** It is important to be selected by teachers' literary works that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds to enhance engagement and motivation.

**Gradual increase in text difficulty:** It is considered as a good professional approach that teachers start with simple literary texts that align with students' proficiency levels, and gradually introduce more advanced material to avoid overwhelming students. Early indications suggest that students with higher proficiency levels will engage more deeply with the material, while beginners may struggle with more advanced vocabulary. Teachers' guidance and supplemental materials will likely play a crucial role in mitigating these difficulties.

### Use of digital resources

Instructors should use supplementary digital tools. They could incorporate digital tools such as e-books with annotations, vocabulary assistance apps, and online discussions to help students overcome linguistic challenges.

Digital tools such as e-books, audio books and online discussion platforms are expected to increase the student-text interaction. These tools can further support vocabulary comprehension and allow students to interact with the material in a multimodal way. The use of e-books, online dictionaries and annotated texts can help students to overcome language difficulties. These tools provide definitions and explanations, reduce the cognitive load and allow students to focus on comprehension.

### Active classroom participation

Instructors should encourage active participation. Implementation of creative writing, role-playing, and discussions based on the texts can encourage deeper

interaction with both language and culture. These recommendations will be further refined after the final analysis of the student feedback.

Teachers are expected to incorporate group discussions, creative writing activities, and role-playing games to enable students to actively participate in the literary texts project. These activities are designed to encourage greater interaction with both the linguistic and cultural aspects of literary texts. Teachers can organise discussions, role-plays and creative activities based on literary works to encourage pupils to engage actively with literary works. These activities help to bridge the gap between understanding language and applying language in creative ways.

So as a summary, it is suggested that students should learn to handle literary texts: appropriate choice of texts: teachers are expected to carefully select texts appropriate to the language level of their students and also their religious and cultural backgrounds. Graded reading and annotated texts can be effective in introducing literary texts with appropriate language level, while ensuring students' comprehension. More advanced texts can be introduced gradually as pupil's progress. Also, a good communication with students and spend time with them can help teachers to choose appropriate texts according to their religions and cultures. Finally teachers can encourage active participation of students with various activities like creative writing, role-playing etc in order to encourage deeper interaction with both language and culture.

## Conclusion

This study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice in language teaching by integrating literary texts into English and French curricula for Greek students. While the full analysis is still ongoing, early expectations point to significant improvements in vocabulary, cultural awareness, and critical thinking among students who engage with literary texts.

Future research will build on these findings, with more comprehensive data collection across different age groups and proficiency levels. The results from this study will provide valuable insights into how literary texts can be effectively incorporated into language education in Greece, offering a roadmap for other educators seeking to enhance language learning through literature.

Although no research has been conducted in recent years, existing research suggests that the integration of literary texts for Greek students in English and French language curricula has yielded promising results. Challenges such as the language level of texts and cultural distance are to be expected, but can be addressed through appropriate teaching methods. Future research will provide more information on how these expectations can be realised in practice. When teaching English and French to Greek learners, the use of appropriate texts has proven to be a particularly effective tool for developing language skills. Although there are challenges in selecting such appropriate literary texts and adapting them to language teaching in general, there are significant benefits, particularly in terms of vocabulary development, cultural understanding and critical thinking. Finally, it could lead to sociolinguistic competence providing a richer and more national and cultural based language speaking using idiomatic expressions and other linguistic exceptions, making them closer to these countries linguistic worlds. Teachers should continue to explore ways of integrating literary texts into the curriculum, using both traditional and digital materials to make literary texts accessible and engaging for all learners.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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