



# Functions of Literature in Teaching English for Specific Purposes

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## Abstract

*In foreign language education (FLE) and general English teaching, the value of using literature has long been established as a mainstream component. On the other hand, literature as art has led a fringe existence in teaching English for specific purposes (ESP), as ESP quite naturally and rightly encourages the use of texts stemming from students' professional and academic areas of interest. However, there may be certain niche roles of literature in ESP classrooms, and it is the goal of this contribution to probe into the suitability and ways of integrating short literary texts and extracts into ESP materials. It is argued that literature, in particular prose and fiction, can support, enrich, and endow ESP courses with reflective, motivating, and enjoyable input. For that purpose, the contribution provides short extracts of literary texts and recommends genres likely to contain subject matter with the potential to appeal to workplace-oriented students. Moving from ESP to a more global view, it finishes with reflections on the role of literature in today's society.*

**Keywords:** ESP, literature, fiction, learner engagement, higher education.

## 1. Introduction

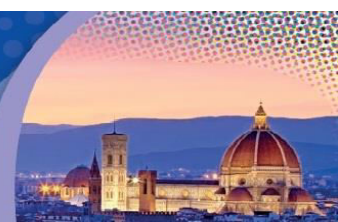
Foreign language education (FLE) and general English teaching have traditionally comprised literature as a form of art in classrooms. According to [1], students in FLE should learn to use the language to build personal relationships, work in business, and embark on further studies. These goals are rather universal, as also ESP aims at such competencies, but the texts used in general English and ESP differ fundamentally. Literature in ESP is closely linked to reading for information and comprises subject-specific texts (e.g., from biology or mathematics), journalistic texts (e.g., from newspapers or magazines), instructional texts (e.g., from manuals, guidelines, or standards), and descriptive texts (e.g., from travel guides or commercial brochures). Literature in general English, however, is often connected with reading for pleasure and rests on popular literature (e.g., contemporary fiction) and literature as art in the forms of poetry, drama, and prose in the canon. Notwithstanding this established and reasonable demarcation, there may be niche roles of literature in ESP contexts as well.

This contribution pursues the objectives of reviewing functions of literature in FLE, proposing functions of literature in ESP, and identifying literary genres and periods suitable for ESP. It is argued that short prose texts and extracts from fiction can provide input for reflection, motivation, and enjoyment in ESP, thus enriching and refining courses geared towards workplace-oriented learners.

## 2. Functions of literature in FLE

In FLE and general English teaching, literature has mainly been employed to foster reading and reading skills. Several authors attribute beneficial educational effects to literature. Literature, for instance, can “amuse, sadden, thrill, frighten, and inspire” [2, p. 143], and there is “evidence that it is motivating and engaging” [3, p. 490; cf. 4]. Furthermore, teaching with literature is “not only about training, but also about education”, thus “developing the whole person” [5, p. 469]. In that sense, literature is a means “to expand and enrich the lives of our students and the society in which they live” [6, p. 171]. There also seems to be some inherent magnetism in literary fiction, when Gottschall claims that humans are “as a species, addicted to story” [7, p. xiv], which makes this genre particularly attractive for educational purposes.

However, there are certain disadvantages of using literature in FLE. It generally involves difficult language; long texts are time-consuming to teach; the cultural context of works may be alien to students; the enjoyment of texts may be spoilt by teaching; and students may consider literature irrelevant [8]. On the other hand, using literature in FLE has advantages, as it promotes education and entertainment, develops literary literacy and the joy of reading, facilitates the passing on of values and norms, contributes to personal growth and self-awareness, and develops empathy [9].



### **3. Functions of literature in ESP**

Functions of literature in ESP may include the provision of input, stimulus, and entertainment in activities and materials. Literature may be used for starting or maintaining conversations, describing scenery and landscapes, introducing humour, initiating reflections on a topic, exemplifying meanings of words, and fostering entrepreneurship.

#### **3.1 Starting or maintaining conversations**

One possible way of employing literature in ESP is as input for small-talk activities. For the simulation of a business dinner, for instance, literary quotations and short extracts related to food and drinks can be distributed on an accompanying handout to stimulate conversation and make students talk about literature in a playful way. An example of such an extract is a passage from travel literature from the turn of the 18th to the 19th century: "The Gambia abounds with fish, some species of which are excellent food; but none of them that I recollect are known in Europe. At the entrance from the sea sharks are found in great abundance; and higher up, alligators and the hippopotamus (or river-horse) are very numerous" [10, p. 5]. Finding suitable quotations on meals, eating, and drinking is rather effortless because culinary situations are often described in novels and stories.

#### **3.2 Describing scenery and landscapes**

Fiction abounds with descriptions of scenery and landscapes, which may be beneficial to certain ESP tasks. Extracts of this kind, for instance, may support descriptive writing tasks in the context of travel-related activities or advertising in business. A series of short texts depicting cities and landscapes could form the starting point and inspirational input for creating a tourism brochure. The following extract is a famous description of Lake Ontario:

The position the two had attained was sufficiently elevated to command a wide reach of the lake, which stretched away toward the northeast in a boundless sheet, glittering beneath the rays of an afternoon's sun and yet betraying the remains of that agitation which it had endured while tossed by the late tempest. The land set bounds to its limits, in a huge crescent, disappearing in distance toward the southeast and the north. Far as the eye could reach, nothing but forest was visible, not even a solitary sign of civilization breaking in upon the uniform and grand magnificence of nature. [11, p. 280]

#### **3.3 Introducing humour**

Humorous passages from novels and stories may be employed in ESP to introduce elements of fun and amusement to a course. Such extracts may ease and enrich character descriptions of business leaders, comparisons of the lifestyles of different people according to income statistics, or attitudes towards life and death. The example given here portrays a vivacious old lady:

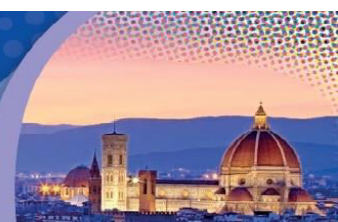
Dalgliesh recalled that Great Aunt Allie had moved in a predictable pattern with her retinue of servants, current lover and general hangers-on from one luxury Riviera hotel to the next, with stays in Paris or Rome as the mood suited her. He was not sure that this orderly programme of comfort and entertainment could be described as being restlessly driven round Europe or that the old lady had been primarily in search of peace. She had died, he recalled, by falling overboard from a millionaire's yacht during a rather wild party given by him to celebrate her eighty-eighth birthday. It was perhaps not an edifying death by the Canon's standards but Dalgliesh doubted whether she had, in fact, been unhappy at the time. Great Aunt Allie (it was impossible to think of her by any other name), if she had been capable of coherent thought, would probably have pronounced it a very good way to go. [12, p. 78]

#### **3.4 Initiating reflections on a topic**

Literature can also initiate reflections on a topic. In ESP related to biology or geography, for example, biodiversity, evolution, and climate change may be suitable topics for reflection. Particularly when addressing the preservation of life, a quotation from Darwin may stand at the beginning of a group discussion: "When a species has once disappeared from the face of the earth, we have no reason to believe that the same identical form ever reappears" [13, p. 382].

#### **3.5 Exemplifying meanings of words**

Literature may further fulfil the function of exemplifying meanings of words in ESP. In the context of job applications, candidates need to underscore their personal characteristics and strengths. Words



helpful for this purpose may be explained to students by means of short literary extracts like the following one illustrating the term *perseverance*:

Great numbers of dangerous places, and the fatigue which we have to encounter is incredible: the men in the water from morning until night, hauling the cord and boats, walking on sharp rocks and round slippery stones which alternately cut their feet and throw them down. Notwithstanding all this difficulty, they go with great cheerfulness. Added to those difficulties, the rattlesnakes are innumerable and require great caution to prevent being bitten. [14, p. 176]

### **3.6 Fostering entrepreneurship**

Finally, literature may contribute to the fostering of entrepreneurship. Extracts from novels or travel literature may be used for activities related to leadership, group discussions on entrepreneurship, comparisons of successful business leaders, or comparisons of landmark expeditions. However, teachers may need to explain the historical and cultural context of quotations they use in ESP groups. The following example is a self-reflection of the leader of an expedition through Africa:

Now that I have returned uninjured in health, though I have suffered the attacks of twenty-three fevers within the short space of thirteen months; I must confess I owe my life, first, to the mercy of God; secondly, to the enthusiasm for my work, which animated me from the beginning to the end; thirdly, to having never ruined my constitution by indulgence in vice and intemperance; fourthly, to the energy of my nature; fifthly, to a native hopefulness which never died; and sixthly, to having furnished myself with a capacious water- and damp-proof canvas house. [15, p. 56]

## **4. Genres and periods of interest in ESP**

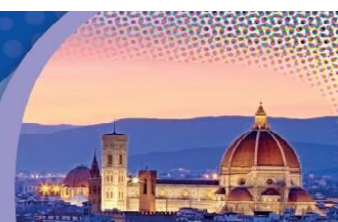
As the examples in Chapter 3 have shown, literary genres of interest in ESP are those where science, technology, business, logical reasoning, and intercultural issues play a role: travel literature, early scientific literature, detective fiction, thriller genres, spy novels, science fiction, mystery fiction, fantasy fiction, gothic fiction, dystopian fiction, romance novels, western fiction, and adventure fiction. Accordingly, current novels of the 21st century and modern classics of the 19th and 20th century are likely to offer intriguing quotations. Particularly the latter periods treat the times of the industrial revolution (with its topicality concerning climate change) and modern themes such as exploration, travel, economy, poverty, relationships, and moral conventions. Furthermore, these periods witnessed a proliferation of the novel, which means choice for teachers and a variety of writers and styles. The language of these works is closer to today's English than texts from earlier periods, and often film adaptations exist [cf. 16].

## **5. Conclusions**

There is a tendency in today's society to read machine-selected text segments sent to consumers of information through digital media. This development bears the risk that adolescent students are socialised as unreflective receivers of messages and prone to manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation. Social media as well as online forums and blogs have been criticised for tolerating hateful speech and offensive posts, and the Internet has brought unprecedented possibilities of spreading dubious texts and fake news to the masses.

Literature, on the other hand, may afford learners the chances to rediscover the pleasure of reading, partake in an experience of art, bond with the target language, and encounter a diversity of genres. Students' familiarity with a wide variety of styles may thus facilitate their recognising ideological, discriminatory, and prejudiced writing and shield them from being spoon-fed with information by dubious entities. In addition, literature may encourage learners to take control of their reading, gain different perspectives on life, and deepen their understanding of cultural contexts. Furthermore, it may substitute real experiences with imaginary worlds and aid students to develop as global citizens, continue forming their identity, and master times of crises.

Even though such general and fundamental educational goals are not prominent in ESP, literature does have certain roles in specialised language teaching. Fiction, in particular, can assume supportive functions in activities and materials. The brevity of extracts is decisive, as short quotations from apt genres and periods may exert motivating and engaging stimuli for reading. It is the role of ESP professionals to both teach the language and educate students, yet literature cannot represent the main or predominant content in ESP, as ESP means workplace-related language instruction based on needs analysis.



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