

Creative and personal responses to literary texts in ELT

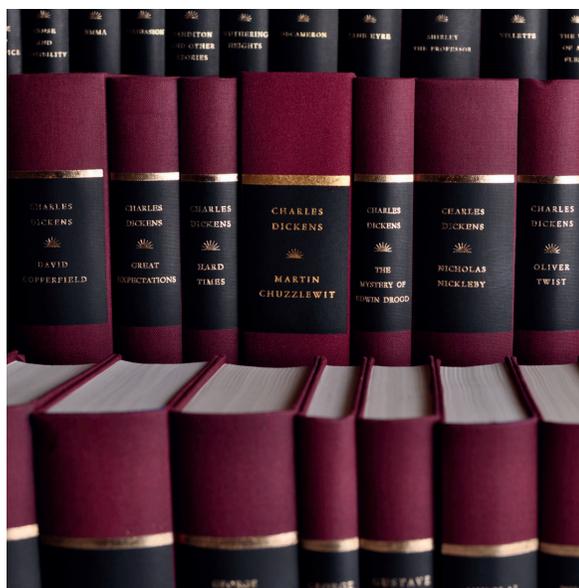
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While there are many benefits to the use of literary texts in English Language Teaching (Xerri & Xerri Agius, 2012), a teacher-centred approach hampers the process of exploiting such texts for language learning purposes. Effective pedagogy places learners at the centre of the learning process by giving primacy to their creative and personal responses. This is in line with Stevens and McGuinn's idea (2004) that 'Perhaps the cardinal rule of effective, adventurous English teaching is to recognise, develop and celebrate



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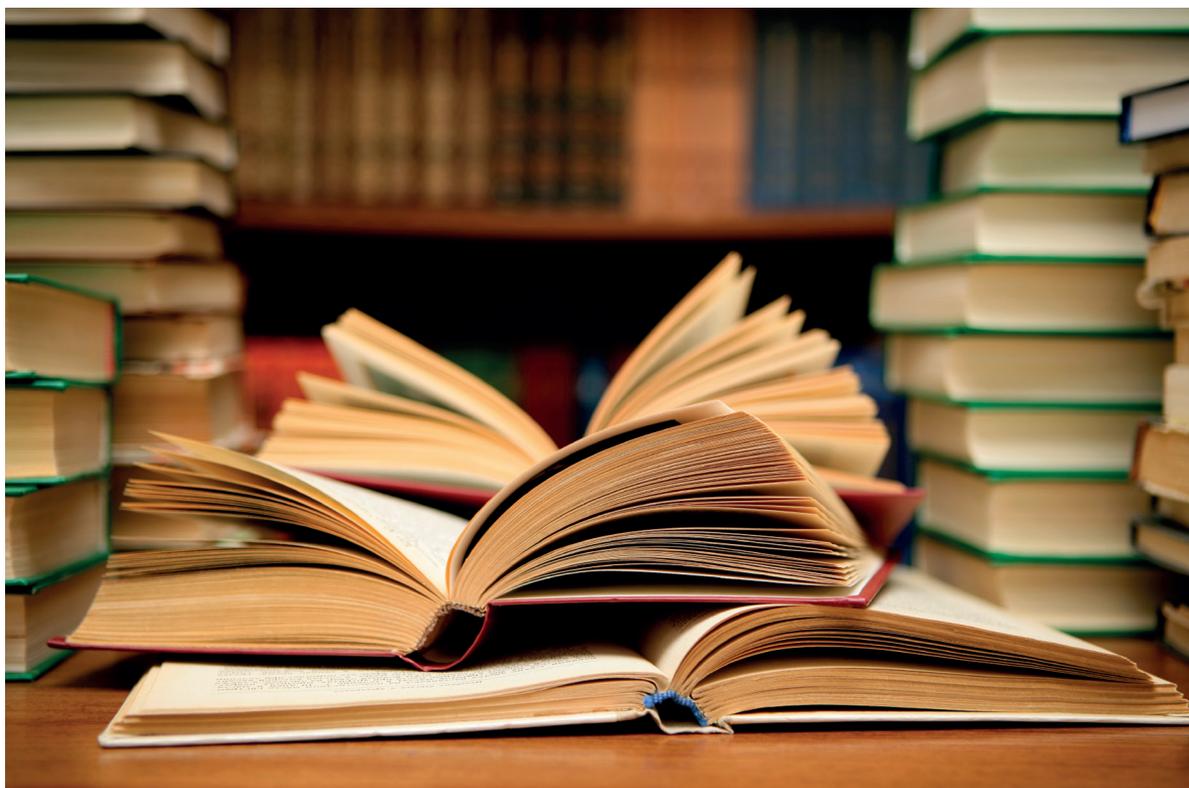


what is already there in the classroom' (p. 6). They maintain that 'A great part of the skill of teaching English lies in fostering the appropriate culture of the classroom to give credibility to students' insights and experiences, and in making creative connections with and between them' (Stevens & McGuinn, 2004, pp. 10-11). When learners are asked to engage with literary texts in the classroom, it is important that their personal response is foregrounded and that creative approaches to such texts are given primacy. Teachers who exert complete control over the generation of meaning inhibit learners from truly engaging with texts.

In a learner-centred educational process, teachers use their 'greater wisdom and experience in opening new awareness and deepening understanding, without destroying personal and felt responses' (Stratta et al., 1973, p. 42). Their role is to facilitate, stimulate and support learners in activities where they investigate, explore and interpret literary texts (Carter & Long, 1987). Learners construct meaning through interaction with texts and with each other (Carter & Long, 1987). Maley and Moulding (1985) suggest that learners should initially be asked to formulate an

individual response and then develop this by means of pair and group work, while the teacher's role is that of monitoring the process rather than leading it. This ensures that learners are provided with 'a more creative role' (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 35) and with 'opportunities to develop their personal responses, rather than being spoon-fed an answer' (Dymoke, 2009, p. 94). When reading a literary text in class, each learner should have the opportunity to develop and confirm their experience of the text by sharing it with others in a small group (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988). The teacher's role is not that of unravelling the text's meaning for learners, but that of listening actively to what they have to say while trying to make sense of the text on their own (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988). By providing learners with more autonomy, an effective engagement with literary texts ensues. Such an approach enables learners to be transformed from consumers into producers of meaning. Moreover, literary texts are 'demystified through a "hands-on" approach' (Maley & Duff, 1989, p. 7).

A pedagogy that devalues creative and personal responses focuses instead on engendering a set response to a literary text. Traditionally,



learners seem to have been indoctrinated into a pattern of response (Purves, 1973) when engaging with such texts. The effect of not adequately capitalizing on children's creativity is that it may fail to be nurtured: 'if there is no opportunity to link a child's love of playing with language with what they are expected to learn about [a text] in class, then that which they have could become irrelevant and devalued in school' (Cumming, 2007, p. 99). This might occur if teachers do not acknowledge the significance of learners' creative and personal responses to a literary text. Dias and Hayhoe (1988) point out that 'For many teachers, the act of transferring responsibility to their pupils for the meanings they make causes great moral unease and is seen as thin disguise for abdicating responsibility for what their pupils learn' (p. 7). According to Scott (1989), teachers 'believe that the student's individual response is fallible and untrustworthy and can only be properly trained by regular contact with a widely experienced and well-informed reader such as themselves' (p. 16). By not providing learners with the opportunity to foreground their creative and personal responses to a literary text, teachers maximise their authority as gatekeepers, increase learners' sense of dependency, and limit the multiple readings that a text makes possible.

A prescriptive approach to the use of literary texts in ELT disenfranchises learners and restricts engagement in such a manner that their creative and personal responses might not be adequately fostered. Stevens and McGuinn (2004) affirm that 'teaching for creativity is quite a tall order, requiring the courage of conviction, yet is within the pedagogical potential of the classroom teacher' (p. 39). In order to tap into this potential, teachers need to develop their knowledge and beliefs about how literary texts should be used in the classroom as well as cultivate the skills needed to cede control to their learners.

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