

LITERARY TEXTS IN MODERN GERMAN LANGUAGE COURSES: IMPROVING LINGUISTIC AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH KAFKA, BÖLL AND HESSE

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Abstract: The paper deals with the role of literary texts in the development of linguistic and intercultural competence in modern courses of the German language. The research is theoretical and does not incorporate empirical data, but is based on relevant academic literature and didactic reflection. Literary texts are seen as valuable teaching materials because they present language in meaningful, authentic and culturally rich contexts. They can help learners develop reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar awareness, oral communication and written expression. Literature, on the other hand, promotes interpretation, personal response and critical thinking. The paper also shows the intercultural potential of literary texts by referring to selected examples of Franz Kafka, Heinrich Böll and Hermann Hesse. Kafka's "Before the Law", Böll's "Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity" and selected short prose by Hesse lend themselves to discussions of authority, productivity, identity, personal development and cultural values. The paper also considers didactic problems such as linguistic complexity, unfamiliar vocabulary and limited student experience in literary interpretation. The conclusion is that literary texts can be effective tools for developing linguistic and intercultural competence in courses on the German language if they are carefully selected and methodologically supported.

Keywords: literary texts, German language teaching, linguistic competence, intercultural competence, Kafka, Böll, Hesse

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary texts have always played an important role in language education, especially when it comes to teaching and learning foreign languages. Earlier traditions of teaching literature often emphasised translation, grammatical explanation or interpretation of canonical works. In modern language teaching, literary texts are increasingly viewed as valuable didactic materials that can support the development of several competences simultaneously. They provide authentic language input and space for interpretation, discussion, cultural reflection, and personal response. This makes literary texts an important source for the development of linguistic competence in contemporary courses of German as a foreign language. Learners come across vocabulary, sentence structures, stylistic forms and modes of expression in meaningful contexts by reading and discussing literary texts. Literature is not just a collection of isolated grammar and vocabulary exercises; it shows language as part of human experience, emotion, conflict and communication. This enables the students to communicate in the German language on a more profound, more intimate level. In this way, literature can help reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, written expression and oral communication. This paper deals with the role of literary texts in the promotion of linguistic and intercultural competence in course of studies of the German language today. The discussion is based on selected examples from German-language literature, such as Franz Kafka's "Before the Law" ("Vordem Gesetz"), Heinrich Böll's "Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity" ("Anekdoten zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral") and selected short stories by Hermann Hesse. These texts are apt for didactic reflection, as they possess a high linguistic, cultural and interpretative potential. Kafka's text provides opportunities for students to engage in symbolic language and questions of authority and access. Böll's anecdote opens up a discussion about work, success, productivity and different cultural attitudes to life. Hesse's short prose can be a springboard for reflection on identity, personal development and human experience. This paper is not written as an empirical study but as a theoretical and didactic reflection on the use of literary texts in German language courses. Thus, the paper does not make use of surveys, interviews or classroom data. Instead, it explores the use of selected literary texts as didactic instruments to foster language development and intercultural understanding. The paper begins with the role of literary texts in foreign language teaching and then it presents their contribution to linguistic and intercultural competence. The last part of the paper considers didactic challenges and methodological aspects connected with the use of literary texts in the classroom.

2. TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS

Literary texts are of great importance in foreign language teaching as they provide more than a mere linguistic input. They embed language in contexts that are meaningful, creative, and culturally rich. Literary texts, unlike purely informational or functional texts, often contain emotions, conflicts, symbols, different perspectives and open meanings. That is why they can encourage learners not only to understand the language, but to interpret, discuss and respond to it in a personal way. Lazar (1993) suggests that literature can be a useful resource in the

language classroom as it brings together language, meaning and personal response. In foreign language teaching literature can contribute to the development of several skills simultaneously. Reading a literary text requires learners' understanding of vocabulary, sentence structures and textual coherence. At the same time, learners are encouraged to make assumptions, find meanings, interpret characters and reflect on the message of the text. This makes literary texts useful to develop reading comprehension, critical thinking and communicative competence. Literary texts, Collie and Slater (1987) believe, can be useful for language learning in that they expose learners to different and real uses of language. Similarly Carter and Long (1991) argue that literature in the classroom can be seen not only as a cultural object, but also as a way of developing language and of engaging personally. Another significant element is that literature exposes learners to genuine and various language. They can contain idiomatic expressions, stylistic devices, dialogues, descriptions, and references to specific cultures. This variety enables the students to experience the foreign language not only as a system of grammar rules, but also as a living medium of communication and artistic expression. Hall (2005) also notes that literature in language education connects linguistic, cultural and educational dimensions. In this way literature as a bridge between language learning and cultural understanding. Kramsch (1993) emphasises the importance of culture in language learning and Byram (1997) connects the teaching of foreign languages with the development of intercultural communicative competence. From this point of view, literary texts may help learners to develop sensitivity towards different perspectives, to reflect on the target culture and on their own cultural background.

3. LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN LITERARY WORKS

Linguistic competence, in addition to knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, also refers to the ability to understand, interpret and use language appropriately in different contexts. Literary texts can support this in German language courses through the presentation of language in meaningful and authentic contexts. In place of learning words and structures in isolation, learners are exposed to them in context, in situations, dialogues, descriptions and narrative forms. A very important contribution of literary texts is their potentiality to develop reading comprehension. The students read a short story, a poem or an excerpt from a literary work and they are supposed to understand not only explicit but implicit meanings. They have to locate important information, discern connections between ideas, and comprehend the motives of characters or narrators. Literature, according to Lazar (1993), can encourage learners to be active participants in creating meaning. This active involvement assists students in going beyond rote reading and in developing more sophisticated comprehension strategies. Literary texts also help in vocabulary learning. They provide learners with words, expressions and phrases in meaningful contexts which can help make new vocabulary easier to remember. As Collie and Slater (1987) suggest, literary texts provide a rich variety of language and can thus enrich learners' lexical knowledge. Words are also frequently placed by literature in emotional, cultural or symbolic contexts. This allows the learners to understand the connotations and stylistic use of the word as well as the basic meaning. Another crucial point is the grammar in context. Literary texts demonstrate grammatical structures in a context of real communication and artistic expression. For instance, students can observe the use of tenses in narration, modal verbs in presenting possibilities or obligations, and sentence structures in dialogue and description. According to Carter and Long (1991), literature can be used not only for cultural or literary purposes but also as a resource for language development. So grammar in this sense becomes more meaningful as it relates to content and the text message. Literary texts can also enhance oral and written communication. Students can discuss characters, situations, conflicts and possible interpretations after reading a text. Such discussions stimulate them to express opinions, justify ideas and respond to the views of others. Paran (2008) points out that literature in foreign language learning can lead to meaningful classroom interaction. Written assignments such as summaries, personal responses, alternative endings or character descriptions can additionally help students to develop their written expression. Therefore, in modern German language courses, literary texts have to be considered as more than just reading matter. They can be used as didactic means for the development of vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, oral and written communication.

4. INTERCULTURAL LEARNING WITH KAFKA, BÖLL AND HESSE

Literary texts are especially useful in foreign language teaching because they offer intercultural learning opportunities. Language and culture are interrelated, and literature is frequently a mirror of cultural values, social norms, historical experiences, and alternative ways of perceiving the world. In this sense, literature can help learners to develop not only linguistic competence, but also intercultural awareness. Kramsch (1993) stresses the cultural context in language learning and Byram (1997) says that foreign language learning should develop intercultural communicative competence. In this sense, literary texts can serve as an important bridge between language learning and cultural reflection. A good example of a literary text that can promote intercultural and critical reflection is Franz Kafka's "VordemGesetz" ("Before the Law"). The text raises questions of authority, access, power and individual responsibility. In a German language class, for example, learners might discuss how the text represents the relationship between the individual and the institutional structures. At first glance Kafka's language seems simple, but the text demands a deeper interpretation with its

symbolic meaning. This makes the text suitable for classroom discussions where students voice different opinions, compare interpretations and reflect on broader social and cultural meanings. These activities can help learners to understand that literature does not always have a single, fixed meaning, but often leaves open a space for multiple perspectives. Another good example for intercultural learning is Heinrich Böll's "Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral" ("Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity"). This article tackles questions about work, success, productivity, lifestyle and happiness. These topics are particularly relevant in language teaching as they allow students to compare attitudes to work and life in different cultures. Can success always be associated with economic productivity or can we have a different understanding of a meaningful life? Learners can discuss. This comparison prompts students to reflect on their own cultural background as well as the target culture. Böll's anecdote is thus a useful tool for reading comprehension and vocabulary work, but also for cultural awareness and critical thinking. Selected short prose by Hermann Hesse also serves intercultural learning in German language courses. The common themes in Hesse's texts are identity, self reflection, personal development, inner conflict and the search for meaning. The topics are global, but their interpretation depends on the cultural and personal experiences of the learners. In the classroom, students can talk about characters, conflicts and values and also relate the text to their own perspectives. This creates a meaningful learning situation where language becomes a tool for personal expression and for intercultural dialogue. Literary texts are more than just reading material; contemporary German language courses use Kafka, Böll and Hesse. They can encourage learners to contrast viewpoints, question taken-for-granted assumptions and develop awareness of cultural differences. Lazar (1993) states that literature in the language classroom can promote personal involvement and meaningful communication. This is particularly the case in intercultural learning, where students are not passive recipients of cultural information, but rather active interpreters and discussants of it. However, the teacher's role is critical to guide this process. Learners need suitable tasks that give them the opportunity to approach the texts step by step. Pre-reading activities can present key themes and vocabulary, and post-reading activities can encourage discussion, comparison and reflection. For example, students can compare different concepts of success in Böll's anecdote, discuss the meaning of authority in Kafka's text or reflect on identity and personal development in Hesse's prose. Literary texts are thus didactic tools that support the acquisition of language and intercultural competence. Thus Kafka, Böll and Hesse can be introduced in German language courses not only because of their literary importance, but also because of their didactic potential. There are profound themes, cultural questions and interpretative openness in their texts. If they are accompanied by appropriate tasks and adapted to the learners' level of language, they can contribute to the development of a deeper understanding of German language, German-language literature and intercultural communication.

5. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DIDACTICAL CHALLENGES

Literary texts offer many possibilities for language learning and intercultural reflection. Nevertheless, their use in German language courses also poses a number of didactical challenges. These challenges are mainly due to the linguistic complexity of literary texts, the learners' language level, their motivation and their previous experience of literary interpretation. Literary texts therefore require careful preparation before use. The teacher has to choose texts suitable to the learners' level, interests and learning objectives. The language of literary texts is one of the most frequent problems. Some literary works contain long sentence constructions, stylistically marked expressions, symbolic language or vocabulary that could be unfamiliar or old-fashioned. This can make the reading process difficult for students, particularly as they are still developing their competence in the German language. Hossain (2024) notes that language learning through literature is not easy because of the linguistic complexity and the need to choose the right material. If learners spend too much time on unknown words they can lose the general meaning of the text and become discouraged. Another key challenge relates to learners' critical thinking and interpretative skills. Based on our experience in the classroom, students often lack well-developed abilities in interpreting the deeper message of literary texts or the intention of the author. This problem is not simply a matter of the texts being in a foreign language; In many instances, learners may have had little or no prior experience with literary analysis in their first language. If students are not accustomed to interpreting metaphors, symbols, anecdotes or implied meanings in their first language, it is even more challenging for them to do so in a foreign language classroom. This is particularly relevant when we deal with texts like Kafka's "Before the Law", Böll's "Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity" or selected short prose by Hermann Hesse. These texts may seem easy to understand at first glance, but they have deeper meanings that need to be interpreted, reflected and discussed critically. For example, Kafka's text cannot be understood solely by literal reading, because it is a symbolic meaning that needs to be understood. Böll's anecdote also asks students to think about values such as work, success and happiness. Hesse's Prose invites the readers to think about identity, self-reflection and development. If left to their own devices, students may grasp the basic plot, but they could miss the larger message of the text. For this reason the teacher plays an important role. Lazar (1993) stresses that literature in the language classroom needs to be supported by appropriate activities that enable learners to participate actively in the construction of meaning. Teachers should guide their

students step by step, starting with pre-reading activities, vocabulary and context. Guiding questions during reading can help students identify important ideas, characters, conflicts and symbols. Discussion tasks may follow reading, written reflections or comparison with students' own experiences to support deeper understanding. Methodologically, the gradual transition from understanding to interpretation is important. "After students know the literal meanings, they should be asked to talk about abstract or symbolic meanings. Literature can be both motivating and useful if it is accompanied by suitable classroom activities (Collie and Slater, 1987). In this sense, the teacher should not expect that students will be able to interpret complex literary texts by themselves from the very beginning. Instead, it is a gradual development of literary competence, of critical thinking. Practical teaching resources can help this process too. In addition to theoretical approaches, practical teaching resources, such as the DaF/DaZ literature blog, offer examples of how literary texts can be didactically adapted to different language levels and classroom contexts. Such resources can help teachers in choosing suitable texts and in planning pre- and post-reading activities, as well as in relating literary texts to vocabulary work, cultural themes and communicative tasks. Thus, the use of literary texts in German language courses requires a balanced didactic approach. Literary texts should not be reduced to language work or complex literary analysis. They should be more flexible teaching materials linking language learning, interpretation and intercultural reflection. If students are provided with adequate linguistic and methodological support, literary texts can foster the development of not only the German language skills but also critical thinking and the ability to find deeper meanings in texts.

6. CONCLUSION

Literary texts may be an important part of contemporary courses on the German language, since they combine linguistic, cultural, aesthetic and personal dimensions of language learning. They provide learners with the opportunity to experience the German language in meaningful contexts and to work on vocabulary, grammar, style and discourse beyond isolated exercises. Literary texts allow students to develop reading comprehension, to enlarge their vocabulary, to improve their written and oral expression and to become more aware of how language works in different communicative and cultural contexts. The discussion in this paper has demonstrated that literary texts are useful not only in developing linguistic competence but also in promoting intercultural learning. Texts from writers like Franz Kafka, Heinrich Böll and Hermann Hesse can be used to challenge learners' thinking about issues of authority, work, success, identity, personal development and human experience. These themes enable students to compare perspectives and make links of the target language to wider cultural and social meanings. Through this, literature has the potential to help learners develop intercultural awareness and a more reflective relationship with the foreign language and their own cultural background. At the same time, the use of literary texts in German language courses requires a careful didactic preparation. Literary texts can be difficult to understand because they may use complex language, contain symbolic meanings, and include unfamiliar vocabulary or cultural references. Another problem is that students may not always have enough prior experience of literary interpretation or critical reading, even in their mother tongue. Teachers must therefore provide adequate support through vocabulary preparation, contextual information, guiding questions, discussion tasks and written reflection. These methodological steps can help learners to develop from a basic understanding to a deeper interpretation. In conclusion, literary texts should not be considered as materials only for advanced learners or for literary analysis only. If selected according to the language level of the learners and supported by appropriate tasks, they can become effective didactic tools in German language courses. The value of these is in their ability to connect language learning with interpretation, creativity, cultural reflection and critical thinking. For this reason, literary texts can play an important role in the development of linguistic and intercultural competence in contemporary German language teaching.

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