Teaching English Literature in the Digital Era

Podučavanje engleske književnosti u digitalnom dobu

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Abstract—Not many students (and teachers) like to study (and teach) literature. Reading, analysing and interpreting a literary work may be a time-consuming and exhausting task especially for those who are not bookworms. How can teachers motivate students to read literary works and make them develop critical thinking? In the age of digital natives where everything starts and ends with a “click” on the swift keyboard, this seems to be a far-fetching undertaking. However, the use of audio-visual devices and various online educational tools in teaching both – foreign language and literature – might trigger motivation and encourage the learning process. The aim of this paper is to identify, explore and analyse innovative approaches to foreign language acquisition, more precisely, the English language teaching and learning, by using literature (prose and poetry) as an unconventional teaching tool. Apart from the works of classical literature, the creative works of pop culture such as films, TV series, video games and songs will be used as a powerful means of breaking boundaries, learning and integrating, studying and having fun.

Keywords – language teaching; language acquisition; literature; popular culture; unconventional language teaching approaches

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching literature in the twenty-first century means using interdisciplinary approaches that combine traditional language teaching with innovative teaching methodologies such as the implementation of various online educational tools (Nikolić and Dabić 2016), the application of audio-visual devices (Nikolić 2017) and the use of the Internet – the key source for providing access to many distinct literature websites, media content (newspapers, films, documentaries, plays, video games, songs), printable worksheets with different sorts of activities and social networks for sharing teaching ideas, materials and experience. However, in order to reach an adequate level of successful combining traditional and modernpractices in teaching literature, we should start from asking ourselves a simple question – what does teaching literature really mean?

The question might be easy. The answer as well. Teaching literature means trying your best to make your students read prose and poetry. Teaching literature means trying hard to make them love what they are reading. Teaching literature means teaching them to think critically. Teaching literature means introducing them to the past in order to understand the present. Teaching literature means motivating them to become engaged with contemporary social issues and helping them to learn how to make educational guesses about the ones that will come in the future.

Perhaps we should formulate our initial question in another way. How can we identify, explore and interpret the human values lying in the core of any literary work if we live in the era of technology that dehumanizes society in many aspects? The era of digital natives may complement the period of Industrial Revolution. A man is a working machine. A man is recuperated through establishing a one-to-one relationship with another human being, that is, establishing a one-to-one relationship between a student and a teacher. Teaching literature is surely a challenging and demanding task, but it also presents the easiest way of ‘reaching’ the other human being in a digital era. Conversely, it provides a delightful springboard to fancy, a vigorous play with reality and imagination and a critical way of thinking beyond the language boundaries. This is why it is important to bridge the

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gap between the students -equipped to live in the digital era, in which everything starts and ends with pressing the keyboard button - and traditional and conventional ways of language teaching and learning –an outdated and monotonous practices that seem almost ridiculous in a modern, fast-changing world. Students should get to grips with language as set down with thought, care and passion of someone who has a cultivated talent for wording (Lindstromberg 2004). Why not use the best of technology and try to boost real social interaction by teaching students how to enjoy the works of literature?

In the following passages we will present and explain several innovative teaching techniques, many of which had already been used in practice, that can make literature classes more attractive, dynamic and interactive. The new teaching techniques have been used during the course of Victorian literature attended by the students enrolled on the second year of the Faculty of Philology at Sinergija University. We will also present two unconventional approaches that can be used in teaching English literature of the Victorian period, though they have not been used during the course.

II UNCONVENTIONAL TEACHING PRACTICES – THE VICTORIAN LITERATURE

We will start with the technique that was initially used few years ago with the students of the third year of the Faculty of Philology at Sinergija University. Namely, the literary text the students analyzed during the literature classes (Thomas Pynchon’s novel Inherent Vice) was used to draw attention to unconventional reading of the novel that involved music and smartphones and was aimed at tackling slang words and complex language of the literary text (Nikolic 2017: 120-124). The procedural steps used with Pynchon’s text have been followed while teaching students Dickens’s Great Expectations. The aim of the activity was to draw the students’ attention to the dialect of the working class and the poor.

The students were divided into pairs and given short book excerpts that included a dialogue between the protagonist Pip and his ignorant brother-in-law Joe (step 1).

“How do you spell Gargery, Joe?” I asked him, with a modest patronage.
“I don't spell it at all,” said Joe.
“But supposing you did?”
“It can't be supposed,” said Joe. “Tho' I'm uncommon fond of reading, too.”

“Are you, Joe?”
“On-common. Give me,” said Joe, “a good book, or a good newspaper, and sit me down afore a good fire, and I ask no better. Lord!” he continued, after rubbing his knees a little, “when you do come to a J and a O, and says you, 'Here, at last, is a J-O, Joe,' how interesting reading is!” […]

“Didn't you ever go to school, Joe, when you were as little as me?”
“No, Pip.”

“Why didn't you ever go to school, Joe, when you were as little as me?”
“Well, Pip,” said Joe, […] “I'll tell you. My father, Pip, he were given to drink, and when he were overtook with drink, he hammered away at my mother, most onmerciful. It were a'most the only hammering he did, indeed, 'xcepting at myself. And he hammered at me with a wigor only to be equalled by the wigor with which he didn't hammer at his anvil.—You're a listening and understanding, Pip?”

(Great Expectations, Chapter 7, pp. 38-39).

The students were then encouraged to choose a song from the playlist composed of the most popular rap songs (2), listen to its karaoke version on You Tube (3), make sure they were clear about the beat or tap it out as they replayed a bit of it (4), and record the karaoke version after practicing singing the fragments in pairs (5). Each pair had one smartphone for playing the song and another one for recording it (6). After the audio recording was made, each pair was called out to play it. The follow-up activity included finding other examples in the novel that pointed at Dickens’s use of language as a tool of making humorous or ironic points about a character’s simplicity, ignorance or self-importance.

The next activity focuses on the use of a text-based vocabulary that accompanies the excerpt from Great Expectations. This activity combines a traditional written exercises with active learning improvisation. Handouts with sixty vocabulary words from Great Expectations had been distributed to students. Each word was written on the Index card that contained a vocabulary word on one side and its definition on the other. The cards were duplicated and students played matching and guessing games as well as quizzes on the words from the vocabulary list. A variation of this activity included Index cards with the names of characters (Estella, Miss Havisham, Mr. Jaggers) and the setting (Satis House, the graveyard, the marshes at night). Also, non-text suggestions are used for the setting, such as a basketball game, a café, a bus station, etc. Students are given an index card with the character, a setting is assigned as well as three vocabulary words from the vocabulary list. The students’ task is to provide a context where these words can be properly used.

A classroom video is another valuable tool used with the Dickens’s novel to enhance observation and critical thinking. Few scenes from the novel that the students have analysed closely have been chosen by the teacher: a) Pip meets the convict in the graveyard (Chapter 1-3); b) Pip’s first meeting with Estella and Miss Havisham (Chapter 8). Two film versions of Great Expectations are brought to the class (a 1999 version with Charlotte Rampling as Miss Havisham and a 1946 version with Alec Guinness as Herbert Pocket and Martita Hunt as Miss Havisham). The students are told to read the parts of the chapters with the scenes selected before playing the film and write down a description of the setting and objects they expect to see in the film, the actions they anticipate occurring or the reactions they expect to see. The
students are also told to think about weather conditions for outdoor scenes, lightning for interiors and background music or noises. Then one of the scenes is showed to the students and paused. They are asked to jot down, without discussion, the details of what they have seen. They share their notes. The same scene is then showed in another film version.

We will now mention two innovative teaching methodologies that have not been used during this course but can be applied to teaching literature in general. It is important to mention, however, that these teaching strategies should be carefully planned and developed in advance since they cover a longer period of implementation and require a serious pre-teaching engagement. A teaching method that is to be described requires a constant student interaction, both individual and group work, and assumes working on the project focused on constructing an appropriate ending for the incomplete work of fiction. During this project, students are simultaneously encouraged to be critical readers and imaginatively writers. For the purpose of demonstrating this technique, the unfinished Dickens’s novel The Mystery of Edwin Drood is used. A detailed procedure is explained in the paper entitled “Teaching Dickens by the numbers: A Case Study of The Mystery of Edwin Drood” (Chavez and Hauhart 2017: 35-52). Due to the limited length of this paper, we will briefly mention the most important steps of this teaching strategy.

After introducing students to Dickens’s writing style and using projector to show how the original part-installments for a nineteenth-century novel looked like, the students are assigned a group task of solving the mystery of the novel and creating the ending that would resemble the author’s own work. Each group writes an individual essay explaining their plot choices and the way they fit into an appropriate and compelling conclusion. Lively class discussions follow the activity. During this stage, students are provided with handouts containing useful vocabulary and Dickens’s strategies in his first six installments. These handouts serve as a useful reminder of the subtle elements within the narrative structure and the plot itself (its raising action, the climax, the falling action and the denouement) (Chavez and Hauhart 2017: 36-38). The next steps assume employing close reading or, as the authors of the paper call it, “reading like a detective” technique (1), encouraging students to look for the “clues” that Dickens might have planted to set up his mystery (2), providing the students with the handouts containing the key “clues” analysis (3) and files containing the “testimony” from Dickens’s biographer John Forster together with his illustrations that accompany the novel (4). In order to help students to recreate suspense - a typical element in Dickens’s novels – in their endings, two techniques are used: planting the obvious “clues” to foster hypothesis about the murder and using the intentional cliffhangers. (Chavez and Hauhart 2017: 38-40). A useful follow-up activity might be teaching students how to interpret the text by using four separate critical lenses: postcolonial, psychological, historical, or gender/feminist. Namely, the students are given the handouts with explanations of each of these lenses and are encouraged to choose one and apply it to their own novel endings. This activity is very valuable since one of the best ways of achieving a text cohesiveness, which is a final goal of the task described, is employing one of these interpretive lenses.

Another approach that might be applied to literature teaching - Victorian literature in particular – and that seems to be quite challenging is a so-called service-learning technique. This technique is explained in detail in the paper entitled “Dickens and Public Humanities: A Service-learning Approach” written by Diana C. Archibald. The author of the paper defines it as a pedagogical tool designated to help students meet course content and skills and objectives through undertaking “real” work for “real” people (Archibald 2017: 244). It is used to complement the methods of the traditional literature classroom but is frequently perceived as an extremely complex and time-consuming technique that can easily lose its own focus if not guided adequately. Moreover, it is shown that many students find it difficult to comprehend its real practical purpose. Conversely, those who understood it in the right way are thrilled and they all agree that it has been beneficial in many ways. For the purpose of this paper, we will briefly mention its procedure by using the example that Archibald provided - Dickens’s story “A Christmas Carol”.

Basically, this challenging approach assumes the students working with the public on a Christmas Carol project. Joint cooperation of the university students and people outside of academe can lead to surprising insights and better understanding of how the story of an old miser Scrooge relates to real-life experience. Students conducted biographical research on Dickens’s family life and historical research on Victorian Christmas traditions, games, fashion, and food. They modified their research findings into forms that were more accessible for children and developed their own Christmas Carol play that assumed creating costumes and a set, memorizing lines, rehearsing and videotaping the performance. The project also included various topics and activities related to Dickens such as “Cooking with Dickens”, where the class prepared recipes by Catherine Dickens, “Manga Art class” where the students painted pieces that were later displayed at a local coffee shop during the city’s Dickens festival, and a “Book Creations class” where the students made scrapbooks featuring images of Victorian women and fashion (Archibald 253). The aim of these activities was to “increase the girls’ interest in literature and history and improve their communication skills, academic achievement, and self-confidence, all while exposing them to the literary talents of Charles Dickens” (253). Written and oral assignments focused on close reading and detailed analysis of Dickens’s story followed together with students’ discussions about charity versus community engagement, volunteering versus service learning, charitable donations, caring about neighbours, etc. This approach offers an alternative way of teaching students to observe the world from different perspectives; it also encourages them to make connections with the world outside of their social circle and triggers their learning through the work they perform while meeting the needs of the community.
III THE FIRST ENCOUNTER: STUDENTS VS ANGLO SAXON POETRY

English Literature 1, the course students are enrolled in during the first year of studies, aimed at making students become familiar with the first ten centuries of the history of English literature, terrifies students - the last book many of them have read at this stage being Ćopić’s *Eagles Fly Early*.

The first method used by a teacher is, of course, provision of historical and cultural context: what kinds of heroes were present in the oral Anglo-Saxon poetry of that time. Then, we bridge the cultural gap – teachers remind students of their national epic poetry, i.e. compare the first, grand, Anglo-Saxon hero, Beowulf, to Serbian hero of all times – Marko Kraljević. But, something is still missing. It is clear that digital generation of our students is not much impressed by reading the Death of the Mother of Jugović’s. We need something new, fresh and fast to catch students’ attention, as well as to make their emotions run deep.

Than a brilliant idea came into existence - a video game! Video games are a great digital tool to attract contemporary generations of students – placed next to novels and poetry, they become a powerful “accomplice” to teachers – students will be doing what they really like, and connect it to undiscovered, but precious, world of literature. Video games combined with learning process, carefully chosen and integrated, inspire even those students who appeared completely underwhelmed, even lethargic.

In this way, the English Literature classroom becomes a place of diversity, where media from two thousand years ago to this day, from Gilgamesh to Tupac Shakur (Heick, 2012), can be used with a purpose. In this way, we bring students into a completely new sphere where they can read, watch, play; write and discuss, revise and rethink some of the prominent, influential topics provided in the best possible variant of the English language, by some of the greatest minds of all times.

There is very popular video game called Skyrim (2011).The game's main story revolves around the player character’s quest to defeat a dragon that is prophesied to destroy the world. Sounds familiar? Yes, exactly, the mythological base for this game is Beowulf, the greatest Anglo-Saxon epic. Over the course of the game, the player completes quests and develops the character by improving skills. Characters, places, mythological creatures, the theme of heroism, companionship, are all present in both, the epic and the video game. The game continues the open-world tradition of its predecessors by allowing the player to travel anywhere in the game world at any time, and to ignore or postpone the main storyline indefinitely. This game is considered to be one of the greatest video games of all time – which makes it a great digital tool to make the epic less distant to students.

The task given to students – to compare and contrast (because, there are differences, too) the video game to the first Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf, proved to be a huge success. Students were not only interested into the epic itself, but they successfully started a completely new road in their life: the road of literature lovers. The problematic barrier between students and literature was broken – they were eager to continue the search for parallels among notable works of literature and video games, which are fully integrated into everyday life of millions of young people all over the world. On one hand, video games have reached much more complex, nuanced and deeper understanding, and, on the other hand, the classic literature has become not-too-distant, but engaging and inspiring.

IV SHAKESPEARE TODAY

Shakespeare – the greatest, the timeless, the beloved master, who left invaluable wealth to the mankind, is inseparable part of English Literature studied at the faculties. But, teaching Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets to a group of young people can be intimidating – the era of Renaissance, its language, habits, circumstances – are frequently seen as distant to young people maturing in the age of Internet, email, mobile phones, and all the rest of ‘smart’, digital toys of man. On the other hand, our age recognizes the change in the mental, psychological constitution of readers, writers, everyday man (Đerić Dragičević, 2018). So, once again, we need to bridge a gap between those great works of literature which, unfortunately, seem remote to contemporary, post-postmodern students. Our students have heard of, for example, Shakespeare, but they are pretty shocked after finding out that the true master of tragedy invented (or, at least, was the first documented user) over 1700 words, that can be found in dictionaries today. Some of these words are frequently used by all of us – such as dire, horrid, obscene, vast, etc. Who do you think invented the words manager, fashionable, eyeball, laughable, gloomy or lonely, among others?

If this peculiarity does not intrigue our future bookish intelligentsia, we move to the next level. Films. One of the most effective tools in bridging this gap between students and the Renaissance art is the medium of film. In this way, precious but lifeless texts are brought into the post-postmodern sphere. Films are perceived as acknowledged teaching tools nowadays:

Film does not just serve the study of literature...each film version asks students to consider its own textual structure, and the reasons for its construction (Durran & Morrison, p.19).

Students of our time are visual and used to “seeing” things, so that, for example, *Romeo and Juliet* from 1996, a modern interpretation of this timeless love story, and Leo di Caprio at his youngest, but also one of the best roles, would function as a great introduction to the world of Shakespearean tragedies, especially if we take into account the age and the problems of the main characters. Teachers must decide at which moment they will play a film to their students, in order to get the best possible effect –with or without students’ prior knowledge about the tragedy itself.

Or The Merchant of Venice (2004), the screen revival of Shakespeare’s well-known drama, is raised above the commonplace by a brilliant performance from Al Pacino as Shylock, Jeremy Irons as the merchant, or Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio. These are great reasons for students to read this
dark, powerful drama. Powerful, never to forget scenes from the film can serve teachers as a great tool by which they will emphasize important themes, and which will capture students’ attention completely – they will, at least, think about the play deeply. Another aim will be reached in this way – while in the midst of heated discussions guided by teachers’ questions, students are deeply involved into maturing process. Lines such as the following will surely made a deep impact and invoke rethinking: Pacino’s marvellous articulation making it even, if possible, deeper and stronger influence:

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

(Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1)

These are safe ground for teachers whose primal aim is to make students interested into literature in general. We can, at least, play meaningful clips, carefully chosen, to illustrate certain parts of the play – in this way, we would use the power of film without using too much of our teaching time. Even hints used properly can do a lot. For example, students probably do not know that one of the most famous animated film, The Lion King, was actually based on Hamlet, probable the most notorious Shakespearean tragedy of all. Or, take, for example, one of the greatest films concerned with the value of literature in the first place – Dead Poets Society(1989). Throughout the film, a group of adolescent high school students express their love for culture, art and creativity by holding meetings as a society called the “Dead Poets Society”. Students probably would not connect the role of the magic and forest in the film, inspired by Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream, which is also directly incorporated into the film, in its end, presented as a school play. But, every literature teacher will be influenced by Robin Williams’ interpretation of John Keating’s teaching methods, maybe even tempted to stand on desk during some lectures or encourage students to recite Walt Whitman (Leaves of Grass) while playing soccer. Of course, we cannot forget the great scene in which the teacher is trying to convince his students that Shakespeare does not have to be too serious and formal, imitating John Wayne or Marlon Brando, playing Shakespeare. Many references taken from literature and successfully used in this film make it a great way to trick uninterested, blunt students enter the world of literature. He also quotes Henry David Thoreau’s line from Walden, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” The boys chant lines from Vachel Lindsay’s almost-forgotten poem “The Congo”: “Then I saw the Congo, creeping through the black, cutting through the forest with a golden track.” Shakespeare, Robert Frost, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Lord Byron are also mentioned. But, the most memorable literary reference is the use of Whitman’s elegy for Abraham Lincoln. At the very end of the film, after Keating has been fired, the students climb on their desks and express their passionate loyalty by reciting, “Oh Captain, My Captain.” Because, it is the captain, the teacher, who made them think – will they seize the day, and make their lives extraordinary. By thinking deeper. Thanks to, among other thing, literature, for sure.

Being the embodiment of English cultural heritage, Shakespeare is inspiring enough for teachers to find the best possible way to present him to students. A good film version which will not constrain students’ imagination, watched, possibly, after students actually read the plays, is excellent way for teachers to broaden students’ horizons, and fulfill the aim – to engage students with the plays themselves via filmed adaptations of Shakespeare’s works. The belief that Shakespeare texts should be taught in active ways underpins the resources: the plays were not written to be read like prose but to be brought to life by actors. By incorporating an exploration of renowned film interpretations into a study of the original texts, students will surely develop their interpretive and analytical skills.

V LITERATURE TODAY: STUDENTS’ INSPIRATION OR A NIGHTMARE?

During 20th century, teachers were helping their students to become lifelong readers by simply introducing them to great works of literature – inspiring and engaging books which would broaden their psychological and philosophical horizons, and which would provide them with cultural, historical and social aspects of British and American society.

Nowadays, situation has drastically changed. Students at the Faculty of Philology, who will, after finishing their studies, become English Language and Literature Teachers, are pretty confused at their first class of Literature Theory, and, shocked, usually question themselves: “Why do we need to know what is an oxymoron, and will we read all of these books at the faculty?” Teachers then face the reality – they will need to think up completely new tactics in order to motivate these fresh minds, hooked on various smart screens, to start reading, and to critically think about what they have read.

Giving students collaborative learning assignments described in this paper is a very fruitful teaching strategy. Collaborative learning forces students to work at solving multiple problems in group work. It surely encourages critical thinking, seeks deeper students’ engagement and develops lively discussions that trigger ‘high impact’ learning, which is the ultimate goal of successful teaching.

Also, using film adaptations or video games in teaching literature significantly improves students’ achievements. At the same time, students are being entertained and taught. Above all, the students’ feelings are awakened, senses sharpened, and thoughts deepened.

The authors of this paper wanted to emphasize the nature and the position of literature in the period shaped by electronic technology, the media, and the market. Teachers of today want to offer diverse ways in which students will get the answers, and, in post-postmodern manner, fight against or cope with the digital era, while trying to re-establish human connections, and rediscover relationship with readers.
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