Reading the Word and Reading the World¹:
Introducing Extensive Literature Reading Programs in Awassa College of Teacher Education and its Partner Schools

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ABSTRACT

Extensive literature reading is a controversial area within EFL, both in terms of its effectiveness, and potential contribution to linguistic and cultural imperialism. This article considers the role of extensive literature reading in L2 acquisition from both innatist and critical perspectives. Set in the context of a development project at Awassa College of Teacher Education, Ethiopia (part of the wider English Language Improvement Program project across the country), this study debates whether—and how—extensive literature reading can be beneficial to students of English in school and tertiary education, and how any negative cultural consequences may be mitigated.

INTRODUCTION

When [students] read for pleasure... they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called “language skills” many people are so concerned about. (Krashen, 1993, p. 84)

From the outset, I should admit to a personal belief that extensive literature reading remains an under-exploited, or even untapped, resource in most language-teaching programs. However, this neither reflects a shortage of empirical research into its usefulness (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978; Pitts, White, & Krashen, 1989), nor of pedagogical defences representing a range of theoretical positions (Krashen, 1993; Kramsch, 1993; Scott, 2001; Scott & Huntingdon, 2007; Thornbury, 2005). While it cannot be claimed that literature is universally believed to have any unique, inherent worth (Edmondson, 1997), there does appear to be a striking degree of consensus over its value in L2 learning.

Any superficial agreement, though, masks deep divides over the nature of the language-learning process. The influence of innatist theories and the input hypothesis (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Krashen, 1985) is clear in some early empirical research on literature and language acquisition (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), but its scope is challenged by a sociocultural view of literature (Kramsch, 1993; Scott, 2001; Scott & Huntingdon, 2007). This study will review these positions and their implications.

A necessary extension of this discussion is of Krashen’s book (1993), that it hardly scratches the surface of the power of reading. When issues of power are applied to language,
literature itself can become one of its most dangerous and coercive instruments (Ngugi, 1986, pp. 4-30). For Krashen, in an arguably misguided quest for universal theories (McLaughlin, 1987, pp. 20-55), the only relevant power is the capacity to stimulate effective language acquisition. However, it is quite probable that critical, applied linguists, such as Pennycook (1998, 2001) and Auerbach (1995), would take exception. It has been argued that language policies can perpetuate inequality, making the language classroom “a microcosm of the broader social order” (Auerbach, p. 9). Even more disquieting is Ngugi’s insightful and moving attack on the use of language in imperialist and latterly neo-colonial policy. *Decolonising the Mind* places literature, particularly as used in African education systems, at the heart of the struggle between imperialism and resistance, bitterly lamenting the “fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature” (Ngugi, p. 20). This is pivotal to the context on which the second section of this essay will focus.

Following a decision in the 1990s to adopt English as the medium of instruction in all secondary education in Ethiopia, the internationally funded *English Language Improvement Program* (ELIP) aimed to raise English proficiency throughout the education system. My support of extensive literature reading was central during a year spent working on this project in Awassa College of Teacher Education (CTE). As an ELIP coordinator, as well as being involved with teacher-training courses, I secured funds to buy novels and graded readers for a self-access center, available for students to read and return books. In addition, the center became a base from where seven local schools borrowed sets of stories for extra-curricular reading clubs. Blind to the critical issues, my enthusiasm for this venture was based loosely around an innatist view of language acquisition (Krashen, 1993); that in such a troubled educational context, extensive reading in English would help both children’s and trainee teachers’ English. It was also my hope that literature reading could contribute to independent learning techniques and awareness of global issues and cultures.

I would love to defend my work wholeheartedly, and argue that by overlooking literature, ELIP had missed a great opportunity. However, it seems equally plausible that, having resisted direct European imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, Ethiopia—through language in education as much as any other policy—is stumbling blindly down the same road about which Ngugi warned so eloquently over twenty years ago (Ngugi, 1986, p. 12); the elevation of literature’s standing could represent another step on this path.

A complete ideological and practical solution to this dilemma seems an unrealistic aspiration. However, I will suggest some measures, related to the choice of texts and the manner of their uses, to maximize learning potential while holding culture, diversity, and identity at the center of the endeavour.

Of course, definitions of both literary texts and extensive reading are essential. Thornbury (2005) maintains that “[Literary] texts are clearly not simply transactional: they do not serve merely to trade information, goods or services. Rather, and to varying degrees, they use language expressively, imaginatively and sometimes playfully” (p. 134). While demonstrating that we are working on a continuum of literariness rather than with absolutes, this definition still provides a framework through which most of the research can be analysed. For the purposes of this article, *extensive literature reading* will be the reading of a literary text, with the aim (not always set by the reader) that she will find interest or pleasure in its reading rather than working toward a specific linguistic target. Where these conditions are met, I will use the abbreviation ELR. This satisfies Krashen’s (1985) conditions for acquisition, and allowing analysis of an innatist view. Moreover, some interactionist thinking goes as far as to define “literariness” not by the characteristics of a text, but by the nature of the reader’s encounter with it. Reading as described above encourages a literary interaction (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 7, cited in Kramsch, 1993, p. 18).
In order to provide a worthwhile summary of this topic, it will be necessary to treat certain areas superficially, and omit others. The oral tradition of storytelling, as compared to the written text, remains outside the scope of this review, and the wide-ranging debate over motivation to read cannot be fully addressed. My arguments may have implicit relevance to individual literary preferences, but these are not treated in detail. Finally, the effects of reading strategies have been studied in much more detail elsewhere (Nuttall, 2005, pp. 40-123; Nunan, 1993; Thornbury, 2005).

INNATISM AND THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

I’ve devoted a lot of time recently to research on recreational reading, or “free voluntary reading.” I think it is the most powerful tool we have in language education, first and second. (S. Krashen in a 2002 interview with R. Scott)

As illustrated by the above statement, innatist thinking has produced some bold conclusions regarding ELR, and these demand analysis. In a study on the provision of storybooks in Fiji, Elley and Mangubhai (1983) maintain that “time spent on reading... must... be seen now as educationally beneficial. Furthermore, strict controls over the vocabulary and structures of L2 pupils’ reading materials seem to be unnecessary and counterproductive” (p. 66). On the surface, the supporting evidence is striking. Elley and Mangubhai’s empirical study was conducted in a primary EFL setting, and ostensibly proved that “L2 pupils exposed to a rich variety of high-interest illustrated story book... show[ed] greater gains in English language than is normal for such children” (1983, p. 65). Furthermore, these gains were not restricted to receptive skills, and were not significantly different whether the students discussed the reading matter or simply read silently.

Another intriguing study, based on the novel *A Clockwork Orange*, was carried out by Saragi, Nation, and Meister (1978). They aimed to show that through ELR, native-speaking adults could acquire words solely from context, and recall them later. The novel features 241 invented slang words, loosely based on a language (Russian) of which none of the participants had prior knowledge. The subjects read the book in their own time, and were told they would discuss it at a later date. However, in place of a discussion, they were given a multiple-choice test on the definitions of ninety of the slang words. The average score was an astonishing 76% correct.

The above studies by Elley and Mangubhai and Saragi et al. illustrate the “hard” and the “soft” of the input hypothesis. At the softer end, Saragi et al. shows that adults are able to acquire vocabulary when it is encountered in ELR in L1. Elley and Mangubhai’s “harder” view adds the bold claim that extensive, silent reading at a reasonably appropriate level (comprehensible input), with or without subsequent discussion, benefits L2 learners in a range of receptive and productive skills. Furthermore, the more that is read, the more efficient the acquisition process becomes. While it is by no means my intention to dismiss the theory that reading can facilitate linguistic gains, no suggestion is beyond debate when applied to L2 acquisition (McLaughlin, 1987; Webb, 2008).

Unfortunately for Saragi, et al., no direct parallels between L1 and L2 have been proven. Webb (2008) notes that “researchers tend to agree that incidental learning is responsible for the vast majority of L1 vocabulary learning [but] there is some suggestion that explicit learning of vocabulary may be responsible for most L2 vocabulary learning” (p. 232). Although open to the possibility of L2 vocabulary acquisition through ELR, Webb also
argues that the specific context in which the word is encountered may be a determining factor (Webb, 2008, p. 233).

Ironically, it is Elley himself who partially undermines his and Mangubhai’s “harder” position during another study using two different storybooks. Elley’s (1989) latter study involved children being read to. Direct comparison is impossible; it is, nevertheless, interesting to note Elley’s concession that “the contrasting results... raises [sic] the spectre of story specificity, a problem that has also confused interpretation of the findings from research on vocabulary learning during silent reading” (p. 184). Story specificity would, of course, invalidate Elley and Mangubhai’s (1983) assertion that comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition.

Other spectres are raised by Krashen’s (1993) conclusions. In his view, “reading is consistently shown to be more efficient than direct instruction” (p. 22), “direct instruction” being narrowly characterized as the “attempt to teach language... with drills and exercises” (p. 23). The possibility that other forms of instruction may supplement students’ gains from extensive reading is not countenanced. In a scathing critique, McLaughlin (1987, pp. 49-50) seriously questions the hypothesis that language in its entirety, and particularly grammar, can be acquired through comprehensible input alone.

Furthermore, Edmondson (1997), taking a cognitive approach, makes the striking generalisation that “literary texts have no special status as regards their relevance to and utility for the business of achieving proficiency or general competence in an L2” (p. 45). For Edmondson, “literary texts can be exploited for the activation of cognitive processes which underpin the development of interlanguage systems. But... the same is true of almost any text” (p. 50). Although his justification is controversial, his argument that literature has no special status merits further discussion. While espousing literature reading, none of the above studies have successfully challenged the notion that there is no inherent difference between different types of texts. Krashen (1993) simply recommends that learners read whatever they like. Similarly, when Elley’s research (1989, p. 184) appeared to suggest that sometimes stories of a similar level can yield different results, Elley saw this as more inconvenient than revealing.

This analysis has several implications. Primarily, in terms of moving this study forward, the research cited so far in this article has been useful. It demonstrates that while probably falling short of the most dramatic claims (Krashen, 1993; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), ELR deserves consideration as part of a wider language curriculum. However, innatism remains beset with inconsistency. Principally, McLaughlin (1987) has attacked the assumption that comprehensible input alone is anywhere near as effective a learning device as Krashen (1985, 1993) claims. Furthermore, the ideas of story specificity (Elley, 1989), alongside Webb’s findings that there are more and less effective contexts for acquisition, cannot be dismissed as anomalous. Analyses of individual interactions with literature and how such interactions relate to cultural contexts (Kramsch, 1993, pp. 208-216, 225-226; Iser, 1978, pp. 107-109) warrant attention. Adding these features complicates the picture, but leads toward a more rounded view of L2 reading (Holland, 1975; Ngugi, 1986; Swaffar, 1992; Kramsch, 1993). It is crucial to this study that such issues are first made explicit and then addressed. If not, any defence of ELR in ELIP will remain incomplete.
EXTENSIVE LITERATURE READING: FROM INTERACTIONAL TO SOCIOCULTURAL

Eco sighed deeply and said in a low voice: ‘Then we have a real problem on our hands. Are we going to discuss the book you have read or the book I think I tried to write?’

— Umberto Eco speaking to a fan about The Name of The Rose (Rinvolucri, 2008)

If, as intended, the above overview of innatist theories on literature reading made a tentative case that vocabulary and possibly more can be acquired from ELR, it represents a useful starting point. It is now necessary to modify and expand upon this hypothesis. The relationships between language, literature, and culture hardly concern innatism. If, however, there is a greater complexity beneath the learning outcomes of literature reading than innatism envisages, it will be through reference to these relationships that it is uncovered (Kramsch, 1993; Holland, 1975; Nuttall, 2005; Scott, 2001, Scott & Huntingdon, 2007). This will have the simultaneous effect of bringing the power of literature, and the extremely shaky ethical ground of language policy in Africa (Ngugi, 1986) to the forefront of the discussion.

Initially, it is necessary to consider the reading process itself. A starting point is to suggest that literature only finds realization between reader and text (Holland, 1975; Iser, 1978). As Iser explains, “so long as the focal point of interest was the author’s intention, or the contemporary, psychological, social, or historical meaning of the text, it scarcely seemed to occur to critics that the text could only have a meaning when it was read” (p. 20). According to Iser, the “work” cannot reside wholly in either text or reader, but only in their interaction (p. 21). During literature reading, “linguistic signs and structures... exhaust their function in triggering acts of comprehension. This is tantamount to saying that these acts, though set in motion by the text, defy total control by the text itself... [I]t is this... that forms the basis of the creative side of reading” (p. 108). Such a model may be termed literary response (Holland, 1975) or reader response theory.

One dimension of the reader’s response concerns generalisations drawn from previous encounters, or schema (Nuttall, 2005, pp. 7-8). Kramsch (1993) holds that efficient readers refer to a “believed world [through] background knowledge... called alternately ‘frames,’ ‘scripts,’ or ‘schemata,’” and that “much research on reading in a second language has shown the crucial effect of background knowledge on the reading ability of foreign language learners” (p. 124). This background knowledge may even be tentatively connected to vocabulary acquisition. A possible reinterpretation of Elley’s (1989) findings on story specificity shows that while the two books used were of a similar linguistic level, the less successful was taken from a context which was quite alien to the children, being a Japanese folk tale called The White Crane. The reader’s background knowledge, which enables her to place literature in its wider context and so facilitates the construction of meaning, can be broken into three parts: text schemata (dealing with grammar and organisation), genre schemata (relating to rhetorical structures), and content schemata (concerning the topic itself, Kramsch, 1993, p. 124). Without sufficient access to this wealth of information, “learners [can] badly misunderstand the topic, the tone, the genre, or the purpose of the text, or the intentions, goals and plans of the characters” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 125).

It follows that playing with shared assumptions are implicit in the literature writer’s art. Becker (1992) argues that assumptions about the audience’s cultural understanding help govern the selection of content, perspective, and style in even the simplest narratives. Such assumptions dictate what is said, how it is said—and crucially—what is left unsaid. Iser (1978) draws this and the reader response model together, arguing that “although the text may well incorporate the social norms and values of its possible readers, its function is not
merely to present such data, but in fact, to use them to secure its uptake... It offers guidance as to what is to be produced, and cannot therefore itself be the product” (p. 107). Some implications of this view of the reading process are as follows: Literature only exists through interaction, and each interaction is unique and particular. However, familiarity with various shared norms can be seen as vital to the uptake and effective handling of L2 literature (Iser, 1978; Kramsch, 1993). Furthermore, literature is loaded with such assumptions about the culturally intended reader. The above suggests a connection between effective literature reading and shared cultural knowledge.

Before this discussion can be further advanced, culture itself and its relationship to language must be analysed. A view provided by Ngugi (1986) is one way to address this. Culture is:

A gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing [peoples’] conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life... Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe... All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation, and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next. (Ngugi, 1993, pp. 14-15)

It is also worth clarifying that culture is not something fixed, into which individuals fit without contributing. To define a person as British, Ethiopian, or by any such convenient tag, for example, is to discount the infinite diversity of individuals’ interactions with cultures in a reciprocal relationship. Sexuality, age, and innumerable other factors contribute to a more holistic picture of identity. This view of culture may be described as post-structural (Kramsch, 1993, p. 208). At the heart of the post-structural definition, however, culture remains inseparable from language. Within whichever set of values a person identifies herself, language is the strongest tool she has with which to locate and express this identity (Ngugi, 1986). Thus, language is a product of shared experience which allows—and itself evolves through—expressions of difference. This theory underpins the idea that language and culture are almost indistinguishable. Simply, “it is a truism that teaching language is teaching culture” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 177).

There is a case, therefore, that meaningfully teaching or learning language independently of culture is impossible (Kramsch, 1993; Ngugi, 1986; Pennycook, 1998, 2001). Hence, the language learner or teacher ignores the cultural atlas of literature at his peril. In terms of learners’ misunderstanding, “it is precisely those moments of discrepancy between the culturally intended reader and the culturally foreign reader that the language teacher should value the most... [T]hese moments should be exploited as a unique mirror to the particular reader’s perspective and contrasted with the response of other readers at other times under other circumstances” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 128). While shared cultural assumptions are necessary to the understanding of literature, much more so than transactional classroom dialogues (Thornbury, 2005), such understanding is available through literature itself, if it is handled sensitively. As Scott (2001) and Scott and Huntingdon (2007) illustrate, this has significant relevance to the language classroom. Scott suggests types of comprehension and discussion questions to promote meaningful cultural comparison (Scott, 2001, p. 544), while Scott and Huntingdon (2007) argue the utility of allowing students to discuss their interpretations of a text in L1 in order to negotiate meaning where background knowledge may be shaky. Embracing the interactionist model, and expanding it
to include peer discussion, Scott holds that “the meaning of the text is to be negotiated between reader and text and among learners in a class [and] the meaning changes each time we teach the text to a different class” (Scott, 2001, p. 544). This model closely mirrors the social constructivist view advanced by Williams and Burden (1997, p. 43).

Similarly, Thornbury (2005) raises the phenomenon of intertextuality: Literary texts make frequent reference to previous literature in genre, style, or through the use of explicit or embedded references, and cultural references are not limited to other texts (for example, jazz music and drug use in Kerouac’s On The Road). Initially, “intertextuality will prove elusive to many second language learners, who may lack knowledge of the shared background, both cultural and linguistic, with which the text interconnects” (p. 138). However, as Thornbury says: “Whatever connections are made, the process of seeking them out will encourage a closer reading” (p. 138). Both Scott and Huntingdon and Thornbury therefore express the utility of seeking and examining cultural fingerprints while learning a language. Above all, they argue that literary response has a key place in language learning.

Unfortunately, such cultural encounters in English education in Ethiopia do not often incorporate responses to intertextuality. Firstly, the experience of European languages and cultures in Africa does not exactly facilitate objective cross-cultural comparison. English as a medium of instruction in Kenya, and especially the teaching of English culture through literature, are highlighted by Ngugi (1986) as the colonisers’ most effective tools of subjugation. The relationship between the West and post-colonial Africa is depicted in terms of an ongoing power struggle, characterised by deliberate neo-colonial policies. Any comparison between an English speaker (now including certain African elites) and a speaker of African languages is mostly held to be a comparison between a “have” and a “have not”; an oppressor and the oppressed (Ngugi, 1986, p. 21).

It would appear that in this context, a new objectivity in cross-cultural comparison must somehow be sought (Kramsch, 1993), or new literature in a remodelled English medium must be produced to reflect Ethiopian experiences (Sure, 2003).

Two tentative notions can be introduced here. Firstly, Sure (2003) supports the possibility of emergent Englishes reflecting diverse histories and cultures. Secondly, Kramsch (1993) stresses the need for a cultural comparison within language teaching which takes place not from the standpoint of C1 or C2 (culture 1 or culture 2, Ngugi’s above definition of culture highlights how this would include culture bound and subjective conceptions of good-bad, ugly-beautiful, and everything else) but from a newly created C3 space from which students can compare cultures while appreciating and valuing difference. By examining literature and culture, the argument has broadened significantly. It is no longer sufficient to debate merely whether language can be acquired from comprehensible input offered by ELR (Krashen, 1993; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Saragi et al., 1978). The possibility that shared background knowledge may impact an individual’s interaction with literature has been raised (Nuttall, 2007; Kramsch, 1993; Iser, 1978; Thornbury, 2005) and extended to include the question of the utility of a particular book, even for vocabulary acquisition (Elley, 1989).

While every encounter with literature is unique, existing between reader and text, I have argued that culture and language are almost indistinguishable, reflecting society and shared history while shaping individuals’ self and world views (Ngugi, 1986). Significantly, interaction with literature is among the most culture-bound linguistic interactions. Ultimately, if indeed learning a second language is learning a second culture, ELR is a means to this end (Kramsch, 1993). This has led to advances in teaching a holistic literature-language-culture package in some contexts, such as that cited by Scott (2001) and Scott and Huntingdon (2007), who teach French to English teenagers, but this package approach could be hugely destructive where neo-colonialism and threats to C1 identity are a concern. Two tentative
proposals to divert this neo-colonial avalanche have been forwarded (Sure, 2003; Kramsch, 1993), either through emergent Englishes reflecting diverse cultures, or cultural comparison from a neutral C3 stance. The final section of this study places these conclusions in context, and questions their meaning for extensive reading programs in Ethiopian schools and colleges.

THE POWER OF READING: FROM ELIC MINI-LIBRARY TO ELIC CULTURAL CENTER

Literary education was determined by the dominant language...

_I now read simplified Dickens and Stevenson alongside Rider Haggard._

_Jim Hawkins, Oliver Twist, Tom Brown – not Hare, Leopard and Lion – were now my daily companions in the world of imagination. Thus language and literature were taking us further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds. What was the colonial system doing to us Kenyan children?_

(Ngugi, 1986, p. 12)

The following observations and thoughts on the use of ELR in Ethiopia will be made within a constrained framework. For better or worse, English has already been adopted as the medium of instruction in second-cycle primary education in the SNNPR region of Ethiopia, and in secondary education nationwide. Formal education, in that sense, is already divorced from students’ L1 (and it follows, C1), as well as much of their home lives and shared experience of their L1 communities (Ngugi, 1986). The books available to teacher trainees are currently mainly original versions of western novels and adult graded readers (not specifically targeted at Africa) while most of the school lending range comes from the Macmillan Africa series (_http://www.Macmillaneducation.com/DoingBusiness.aspx?id=668_). No formal classes are currently offered specifically to supplement the reading.

The first question to address is how the stock of books would need to be altered. For the teacher trainees, almost everything was donated by publishers, but this now seems far from sufficient. The implicit onus, as with Ngugi’s above experience, is on students to join a “world of imagination” pertaining almost exclusively to Western style, genre, and content. Regarding the books for schools, although they offend less than the overt racism of _Rider Haggard_, it is debatable whether they even fall within the category of literature. Produced for profit by Western publishers, they fail to address any specific audience, given that they are designed for use across what is arguably the most diverse continent on the planet. The content appears stereotyped, anodyne, and repetitive, and the stories formulaic—a generic “African” issue typically resolves itself in an uplifting ending. Many are moralistic (and based on the moral compass of the development community) and while some imagery, proverbs, and even storylines are taken from one or another part of Africa, in Iser’s (1978) estimation, it is hard to imagine a triggering of any creative act of comprehension relating to the experience of modern Ethiopia. Far more than encouraging reader creativity or valuing diverse reactions, it seems that the desired response is pre-packaged, and the view of extensive reading blinkered.

While highlighting the dangers of using English-written literary texts in African education, Ngugi (1986, pp. 1-5) is dismissive of the possibility of English ever-reflecting aspects of the African struggle. Discussing his early efforts to bend English into Kenyan proverbs and images, he regrets this misguided and ultimately futile exercise, and argues that English literature will never be African; all language, for Ngugi, is too deeply embedded in its own culture to reflect another. The suggestion is that literature, although a powerful part of language education, cannot be a suitable device in most African contexts. However, because
all language is culture-bound, the options are to abandon English-language education altogether because of its cultural ramifications, or to search for a third way.

As mentioned earlier, one alternative would be to subscribe to the thinking of Sure (2003), who argues that African Englishes must emerge, flexible enough to reflect the experience of their speakers while maintaining the fundamental structures that would make them understandable in the international arena. Although these emergent Englishes can never truly reflect a culture, realism dictates that educational problems in Ethiopia are current and pressing, and compromise, however imperfect, must be sought. In terms of reading material supporting Sure’s (2003) thinking, Fighting Poverty (at www.younglives.org.uk/what-we-do/news-and-events/news-archive/three-winning-short-stories) moves away from a typically Macmillan Africa-style story and represents the best of the limited examples I found. Written by a teenage Ethiopian girl, it addresses some unpleasant but relevant themes. Assumed knowledge about religion, social stratification, and poverty are recognisably Ethiopian. These concepts, while very familiar to outside audiences, would be, in Kramsch’s (1993) terms, misunderstood by them without direct, shared background knowledge of their specific contextual meaning. For example, the idea of “having coffee” is culturally loaded, relating to the Ethiopian coffee ceremony; the image of ants “waiting like soldiers” reflects a familiar reality for a nation accustomed to armed conflict. The blunt lack of shock or detail surrounding “he had died in a car accident,” tragically, does the same through its matter-of-fact acceptance of death on some of the world’s most dangerous roads. Moreover, there is the Ethiopian English of “shoe polisher,” which never having been in common usage in the west, is an example of the emergent English Sure envisages. It evokes the sight—familiar across Ethiopia’s cities—of streets lined with young men tirelessly cleaning shoes for small change. More honest literature fulfilling these criteria, and challenging the status quo further, would be a fantastic addition. At a higher level, ironically, Ngugi has produced some tremendous novels in English from an east-African perspective, although a search for suitable Ethiopian fiction would also be worthwhile.

I agree that Ethiopian culture can never be fully expressed in English. That is why I would include translations (in the case of Awassa, into Amharic) of as many Ethiopian-written books as possible alongside the English versions. Based on Roberts’ (2008) finding that skills gained through reading in L1 may be transferable to L2, along with the charges of linguistic imperialism, there is no reason not to have a section of Amharic copies of Ethiopian literature in the ELIC, even where no English version exists. English must not hold exclusive ground as the language of the educated, of education, and of literature.

I also share the belief that cultural knowledge and comparison are relevant to language learning, and would not recommend the removal of any of the current titles. More carefully guided encounters with them are, however, necessary to prevent misunderstanding, promote interest and linguistic development, and help readers move from value-laden readings to a hypothetical C3 position, allowing productive comparison (Kramsch, 1993). In the initial project, there was never any obligation on either teacher trainees or school children to read literature. In retrospect, given Ngugi’s concerns, this was positive. Children were invited to read quietly in an extra-curricular club once or twice a week. The emphasis was not on discussing reactions to the literature. At the CTE, students could discuss informally what they thought of the books, including with the ELIC coordinator, but this was not a well-planned part of the program. In future practice in this context, it is important that the reading of English literature is not imposed on students, as this would be a step backwards. However, there should be significant changes in the way extra-curricular reading programs should be conducted.

Along the lines forwarded by Scott (2001), discussion about responses to texts should take center stage. This could take place either in English or in the L1. Following Kramsch’s
position (1993), cultural comparison is important, but it should be as objective as possible. As well as the type of subjectivity outlined above, there is a further danger in Ethiopia of students associating Western culture with modernity, and Africa with backwardness. The club facilitator needs to be able to put the type of questions forwarded by Scott (2001) and Swaffar (1992), such as “what behaviours are appropriate or inappropriate?” (Swaffar, 1992, p. 243), to encourage a wider cultural encounter based on abstract norms.

It is more important that the facilitator be familiar with the C1, and is able to compare it meaningfully with the foreign work, than that his English is native-like. This means adjustment to the teacher-training aspect of the intervention, to include the ideas on language and culture—and how they are shaped and reflected by literature and education—forwarded by Ngugi (1986), Kramsch (1993) and Swaffar (1992). This, I would argue, constitutes a valid addition to the teacher-training side of the intervention in any case, with or without extensive reading programs. Ngugi refers to the “fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature” (p. 20). This essay implicitly accepts that, from a realist position, English is currently unassailable. It has, however, argued against fatalism by suggesting ways to mediate literature’s neo-colonial power and allowing ways for it to assume a positive role.

CONCLUSION

My endeavors in creating the Awassa CTE mini-library and cluster-school lending scheme were short-sighted, and I would love the opportunity to redress some of them in the light of the above review. The ideas in this study have immense implications for my own future teaching practice, highlighting a range of benefits in using literature in the language classroom (Scott, 2001; Kramsch, 1993). These may include language acquisition (Krashen, 1993; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Saragi et al., 1978), but go beyond this: Reader response, peer discussion of texts, and cross-cultural comparison will assume a more central role in my future use of literature, which will itself take a more central role in my teaching.

I would not previously have considered discussion in L1, or the inclusion of L1 literature in a program mainly concerned with English proficiency, but the teaching of language as culture cannot be overlooked (Ngugi, 1986; Kramsch, 1993). In addition, the need for a new approach (the C3 concept) to cultural comparison based on mutual understanding and appreciation of differences has come to the fore (Scott, 2001; Swaffar, 1992; Kramsch, 1993). This also will be reflected in my future practice.

In the context of Ethiopia, language education intervention is a complex matter. A realist approach is needed, attempting to work within mostly inescapable constraints. ELR would again be a central part of my philosophy was I to get another opportunity to work in this context. However, I would be much more aware of (for want of a better phrase) the power of reading.
ENDNOTES


2. The original novel includes a dictionary of these terms, which was removed for the purposes of the experiment.

3. For example, Edmondson (1997) bases his initial findings on empirical surveys of classes in Germany, before rejecting empirical study as a means by which to show the value of literature.

4. It is also revealing that the other, Rapscallion Jones (Marshall, 1983), is described as typical of the books used in Fijian education, although it was written by a Texan for an American audience. The fact that children were assumed to be familiar with the cultural background of this book highlights some of Ngugi’s (1986) concerns over neo-colonialism.

5. Although Ethiopia was not colonised, and hence is not included in a definition of post-colonial Africa, current trends in development and education make the relationship subject to the same charges of neo-colonialism.

6. An example is how an American audience perceived a German reference to locking a front door as “bad,” reinforcing a widely held stereotype of lack of community spirit. In reverse, however, reference to Americans leaving doors unlocked was not taken by a German audience to illustrate community or harmony, but perceived negatively, as sloppiness (Kramsch, 1993).

7. Practically, this would require a change of attitudes towards non-native forms of English at the Ministry-of-Education level, in the international aid community, and beyond.

8. It is interesting—and unexpected—to note in this story that the parents’ half-hearted and unanswered appeals to God may be interpreted as a small challenge to orthodox Christianity.

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