

**LITERARY COMPETENCE: PRE-REQUISITE AND OUTCOME
FOR EFL LITERATURE COURSES**

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Rezumat: *Competența literară este o finalitate, dar și un reper solid în demersul educațional al studiiilor literare. Articolul analizează diverse abordări și definiții ale acestui concept complex de către experți străini și autohtoni, astfel specificând abilitățile cuprinse în această competență. Exemplificând existența a mai multor nivele de competență literară și a diferitor profiluri de cititori, articolul scoate în evidență caracterul distinctiv al predării literaturii studenților filologi, viitorilor profesori de limbă engleză. Scopul, obiectivele și finalitățile exprimate prin competențe urmează a fi gândite și formulate cu multă grijă, dat fiind faptul că instruirea este în limba engleză.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *competență literară, citire, abilități, scopul predării literaturii, profiluri de cititori.*

Alongside with the acknowledged advantages of including literature courses in an EFL teacher training program there has been witnessed a growing concern among teachers revealing that many students struggle with reading a literary text. One of the difficulties relates to students' poor linguistic competence. However, it is the quality of students' literary competence, which is formed and developed while reading in their mother tongue that enables students to read, understand and thus enjoy literature in a foreign language. Therefore, when teaching literature to EFL students, teachers should be aware of the level of their students' literary competence. In addition, we assume that a teacher's grasping of the concept of 'literary competence' helps to design appropriate reading/analysis tasks that captivate and motivate students and thus contribute to its continuous development. This understanding of the concept is also essential in establishing objective criteria for evaluation.

Operating with the concept of 'literary competence', we may be misled by a simplified approach to the concept and assert it is what students can do with a literary text. However, the issue is really complex and dynamic. The term 'literary competence' was introduced by Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* in 1975. According to the critic, he borrowed the term from Noam Chomsky, who had described linguistics as the attempt to construct an explicit model of linguistic competence [1, p. xi]. Culler defines 'literary competence' as "*the implicit knowledge that readers (and writers) bring to their encounters with texts: what sort of procedures do readers follow in responding to works as they do? What sort of assumptions must be in place to account for their reactions and interpretations?*" [1, p. 134] Culler believes that reading poetry is not a natural activity; readers should get familiar with a set of 'conventions'. "*The conventions of impersonality, unity and significance set the stage, as it were, for the reading of poetry and determine the general orientation of reading, but more specific and local conventions are at work in the processing of the text itself*" [1, p. 178]. The critic maintains that the study of a poem facilitates the reading of the next, and so proficient readers need to have considerable experience in these conventions. According to the critic, a person who knows English but who has no knowledge of the literary conventions of English will be totally confused if a poem is given to him for interpretation. S/he may understand the words and sentences but may not know how to make sense out of it. This complex system of

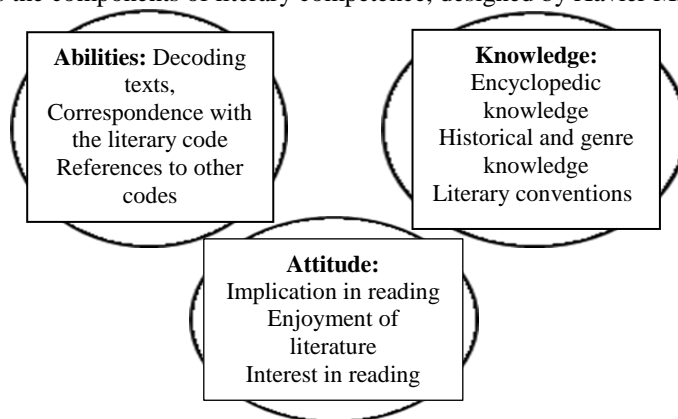
knowledge might be called ‘literary competence’. J. Culler stresses the importance of “*shared knowledge and processing techniques that enable readers to grasp the plot of a narrative and to construct characters from the implicit and explicit information scattered through a text, as well as to engage in the thematic and symbolic interpretation that the institution of literature encourages*” [1, pp. 189-238]. This relates to the readers’ ability to decode signs and infer meanings.

Theo Witte et al. quoted L. Coenen’s definition of literary competence as one, which has been widely used in curriculum and examination documents. The definition says: “*A reader who is literary competent is able to communicate with and about literature. The content of this communication may be varied, but at least shows that the reader is able to construct coherence. This might regard coherence within a text to enhance comprehension and interpretation, describing similarity and variation between texts, relating text and world, relating personal judgment about the literary work to that of other readers. The literary competent reader’s attitude to literature is defined by a certain willingness to invest in reading and a certain open mind regarding to deviant perspectives and frames of reference*” [10, p. 5]. As it is evident from the definition, apart from the reader’s ability to build coherent responses within a text and beyond it, Coenen emphasizes the role of the reader’s attitude towards reading, which should be positive and open to accept the challenges of literary exploration.

Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language Studies distinguishes between literary competence and performance. It defines literary competence as “*the implicit knowledge that enables readers to process literary works as they do, connecting elements and deriving meaning; performance would be their actual engagement with literary works*” [3, p. 212].

In the Republic of Moldova, the concept of ‘literary competence’ has been approached in studies related to students’ literary/aesthetic education in the last twenty years. Reference literature identifies and defines ‘competența lectorală’ that is a closer equivalent in English to ‘reading competence’, which has a narrower meaning. For example, Constantin Șchiopu believes that the study of Romanian language and literature in schools aims at developing communication/linguistic competences, organically entwined with the reading competence, which, in his opinion, implies a wide range of intellectual operations, through which the text is understood not only at the surface of the information it contains, but also as a fabric of signs, ideas and images: “*o gamă largă de operații intelectuale, asigurate (la etapa școlară) de activități didactice, prin care textul este înțeles nu doar la suprafața informației pe care o conține, ci și ca o țesătură de semne, idei și imagini*” [9, p. 100]. Vlad Pâslaru uses the concept of ‘literary-reading competence’ (competența literară-lectorală) and explains it as a complex process of ‘student’s existential awareness’, which s/he understands, reproduces, creates in the coordinate of her/his reflective thinking, in which the world is recreated from the perspective of the reader [7, p. 117].

Thus, although scholars define the concept differently, they agree that ‘literary competence’ includes certain knowledge about literature and abilities to decode texts through reading and connecting it to the reader’s individual reading background. The reader’s attitude is also essential for literary competence development as it implies active behavior. It is impossible to force someone to read, so positive attitude towards reading is an essential component of literary competence. The triangle below represents the components of literary competence, designed by Xavier Minguez [4, p. 37].



1 Components of Literary Competence by Xavier Minguez

Therefore, we may conclude that literary competence is defined as the capacity for free, independent reading and decoding of literary texts, using encyclopedic, genre and historical knowledge resulting in coherent critical arguments.

Dutch authors Theo Witte et al. conducted two empirical studies to describe the variation in the literature curriculum and the development of literary competence in upper secondary education in the Netherlands. They stated that all definitions of literary competence aim to describe the last stage of growth or development. Identifying the lack of levels of literary competence as a serious limitation, they engaged in a research on how to establish and differentiate levels of literary competence. Three criteria were set to establish indicators of literary competence: (1) the complexity of the literary work the students read, (2) the evaluation categories the students used when writing about the books they read, (3) the motive to read or the function students assign to reading literature. Evaluating students' portfolios provided data to design six levels of literary competence:

Level 1 (very limited/extremely limited competence) – cannot read, understand and value very simple literary works;

Level 2 (limited competence) - can read, understand and value very simple literary works;

Level 3 (somewhat limited competence) - can read, understand and value simple literary works;

Level 4 (somewhat extended competence) - can read, understand and value literary works of a medium level of difficulty;

Level 5 (extended/ advanced competence) - can read, understand and value complex literary works;

Level 6 (very extended/ extremely developed competence) - can read, understand and value very complex literary works [10, p. 7].

These six levels of literary competence served as basis in developing six 'profiles' of students, describing their relationship with reading. Every 'profile' includes three components: students' temperament, the characteristics of the text in relation to the student's level of ability, and the capability to perform. The six 'profiles' of students correspond to six types of reading: (1) experiential reading, (2) identifying reading, (3) reflective reading, (4) interpretative reading, (5) literate reading, (6) intellectual reading. Descriptors are provided for every profile type, and consequently, for every level of reading competence. Thus, students with extremely limited literary competence (level 1) are able to summarize a text fragment and recognize certain basic elements of structure necessary for text understanding [10, p. 8]. Students' response to the text is subjective and non-reflective, attention is focused on sympathy or antipathy for the main characters and their experiences. In contrast, students with advanced literary competence (level 5) have rich experience of reading literary works. They are able to analyze and evaluate characters and complex events from different perspectives. By linking various elements and levels of meaning, they can define the main theme. During all these activities they are interested in background information. In addition, their response is guided by the implied literary approach [10, p. 12].

Even though the research was carried on literary competence in students' native language, the findings and the classification into levels and students' profiles may prove efficient in designing literature syllabuses in EFL settings. With regard to literary reading in the foreign language classroom, basically the same questions have to be raised as with the teaching of literature in the mother tongue. "*The purposes of literary education are similar, although a certain stress on language learning is to be expected*" [8, p. 12]. The opinion that literature and language teaching should be mutually reinforcing but not exclusive is especially pertinent for EFL settings. Acknowledging the fact that students are primarily trained to teach foreign languages, literature and language content in a foreign language teacher training program has to be carefully measured and integrated. In training teachers of foreign languages, literature has its distinctive purposes. Parkinson & Thomas distinguish between literature as 'subject' of study and literature as 'resource' and point out it is difficult to draw boundaries between texts pertaining to two types [7, p. 2]. Each of these types of literature approach requires learners to possess different levels of literary competence and, consequently, will lead to different levels of literary competence acquisition. In addition, we should not dismiss the link that exists between the students' linguistic competence and their attitude and reactions to literature. As, for example, Amos Paran argues that in ESL context "*neither of the two extremes exists on its own, and each always includes something of the other*" [6, p. 8]. We assume that in the course of foreign language teacher training, literature as 'resource' should prevail over literature as 'subject' of study, both preparing students for independent interaction with literary works in the original.

If we consider the curriculum (study plan) for the teacher training programme in foreign languages (English) at A. Russo Bălți State University since 2016, we should admit that the dominant medium of instruction in the first and second year of study takes place in students' mother tongue (Romanian/Russian). Out of 30 credits per semester, courses taken in English constitute only eight credits. This seriously impedes the students' gain of linguistic competence in English and impairs their reading literary texts in the original independently. Moreover, the scattered courses of literature included in the curriculum, aiming at developing students' literary competence, pursue a variety of purposes. Thus, *History of World Literature* (semesters 1 and 2) aims at initiating first-year students in understanding the nature and functions of a literary work as well as at providing a generic picture of the evolution of European literature from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. *The Introduction to Theory of Literature* course (semester 2) proposes to examine categories, principles and concepts, essential literary forms to provide students with a wider understanding of the concept of literature and literary work. Both courses are held in students' mother tongues (Romanian/Russian), which, we assume, enables them to get involved into extensive readings and follow up discussions. The study plan does not include courses of literature in semesters four and five and the *History of English Literature* course appears in semesters five and six of the study plan. It sets several objectives, such as to engage students in understanding the socio-historical background of a literary work, identify genres and authors' individual styles, develop students' interpretative skills, and evaluate a literary work by expressing one's attitude. The language of instruction is English, so the students are encouraged to read the assigned works and respond to the assignments in English. The curriculum contains one more course of *Theory of Literature* that students take in their final year. The course engages students in readings and discussions related to the field of literary criticism, getting them familiar with theories developed by R. Wellek, A. Warren, R. Barthes, T. Vianu, etc. The language of instruction is partly Romanian, partly English, and students themselves have divided opinions regarding which might be their preferred language of instruction. This information on the content of literary education within a foreign (English) language teacher training programme shows that literature as 'subject' of study prevails, which imposes a considerate approach to designing the courses, with a particular focus on the formulation of objectives and outcomes for every course in literature. Every literature course should describe the skills (component parts of literary competence) formulated in clear statements, although there is much confusion and disagreement in this area.

Mike Fleming suggests there should be considered a number of questions which may underlie the formulation of competencies in relation to the study of literature. One question is whether literature should be included in the teaching and assessment of language education or it should be treated separately. Claiming that it is inappropriate to separate 'language' from 'literature', Fleming offers examples of how language and literature objectives are often integrated:

- extract meaning beyond the literal;
- identify ambiguity in a text and understand whether it is desirable or not;
- understand how language can be used in imaginative and innovative ways;
- compare texts in terms of structure and style [3, p. 48].

Another question recommended for consideration is: Is personal response to text valued as well as knowledge of literary devices? Examining a list of competence statements applied to literature, Fleming concluded that they betray literary theoretical bias, for example in favour of structuralism, reader-response, psychoanalytic theories or new criticism. Thus, responding to a text from a 'new critical' approach will focus on the way meaning is inherent in the formal features of the text, while a 'reader-response' approach will place more emphasis on the ability to respond imaginatively to texts, to engage with characters. In such case, objectives might take the following form:

- express a response to texts, identifying preferences and backing these up with reasons;
- identify how texts relate to one's own life;
- respond imaginatively to texts by, for example, continuing the story or writing a letter as a character in role [3, p. 48].

In response to the question what types of technical knowledge are thought desirable, the following objectives may be set:

- recognize rhythm and rhyme patterns in poetry and show how these affect meaning;

- identify different narrative styles in a text;
- distinguish different types of narrator in fiction [3, p. 49].

Most of the objectives in the provided example contain verbs like *recognize, identify, distinguish*, that express lower order achievement and stand at basis of the cognitive processes described by Bloom. Such objectives may be set for experiential or identifying reading. For students with a limited level of literary competence ‘recognizing a simile in a text’ will be an appropriate measurable objective at this stage of a student’s literary competence. Gradually, with appropriate didactic input, higher order achievement objectives can be set, as for example ‘understand and interpret complex literary texts’. Fleming argues that it is difficult to express higher order achievement in competency statements, as these generally do not express a ‘can do’ singular action. ‘Understand and interpret’ do not render an action in the narrow sense, they rather englobe numerous simple acts, such as explain, exemplify, compare, infer, classify, summarize. Though, according to Fleming, “it is difficult to capture highly complex achievements in a series of atomized statements”, it does not mean that the principle is wrong. [3, p. 54] It should be kept in mind that competence based programs and curricula are valued for the objectivity and transparency they offer in assessing learning outcomes. Since the purpose of all literature courses is to enhance students’ literary competence, assessment requires them to perform higher order thinking. As a rule, students are assigned written or oral analysis and evaluation of a literary work, which is a voluminous task whose boundaries are too broad. To achieve a more accurate evaluation, topics should be narrowed to one or two elements, as, for example, highlight commonalities or differences in terms of plots, characters, conflicts, settings, etc. Following Fleming’s recommendations, evaluation may be based on the specific skills as described in the curriculum. For example, students can exemplify how in a certain work language is used in innovative ways or they can identify and describe the elements that make up a writer’s style.

In conclusion, it should be reinforced that the concept of ‘literary competence’ is mainly viewed in terms of intellectual performance, as the reading of a literary text is seen as a form of information processing from the linguistic, cultural and historic perspective. Exposing EFL students to authentic literature is advantageous and helps students to increase vocabulary, improve reading fluency and language accuracy. In addition, students learn to cope with the complexities of literary texts by distinguishing between literal and literary, imaginative uses of language. Having students read and critically respond to literary texts in English, by providing systemic and varied practice in inferring meaning, explaining language deviations, allusions, ambiguity, leads to achieving a higher level of literary competence. Initially relying on students’ literary competence level formed in their mother tongue, EFL literature courses may greatly extend the students’ personal reading experience and contribute to achieving a new level of literary competence.

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