

# Using General Interest Essays With EST Students in EFL Contexts<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years, teachers have been revisiting the use of literature in language learning. This paper discusses the possibility of using what we could call **general interest essays** in EST (English for Science and Technology) reading university classes in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts in order to motivate students without forgetting course objectives. Results of a study are presented to argue in favor of the issue. Given the evidence, the paper concludes with practical implications for teaching.

## Introduction

The inclusion of literature in teaching foreign languages can be traced back a hundred years. When the grammar-translation model was dominant, literary texts were the source for foreign language teaching. Later, with the structural approach, literature study was relegated due to the importance given to structures and vocabulary. (Duff & Maley, 1990). In the seventies and early eighties, the new functional-notional communicative movement also ignored literature. Literature seemed irrelevant due to the emphasis on the study of English with specific or practical purposes. (Short, 1990).

Yet, in the last fifteen years literature is being reconsidered within the language teaching profession as a rich and meaningful resource available for language learning

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(Whiteson, 1996; Zaro & Salaberri, 1995; Lazar, 1993; Duff & Maley, 1990; Collie & Slater, 1987; MacKay, 1986; Spack, 1985; Carter & Long, 1991; Widdowson, 1975, Carter and Long, 1986, Brooks, 1989., Dunning, 1989, Lista, 1999, among others.

### **Why Should We Include literature in EST classes?**

Duff & Maley (1990) consider that there are three types of justification for using literature in class: linguistic, methodological, and motivational. In relation to the language, "literature offers genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers, and text-types at many levels of difficulty" (p.6). Methodologically, it offers unique opportunities for students to develop their imagination because we can ask them to infer, predict and interpret meanings since these kinds of texts are open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore literature, is a rich source of classroom activities that can be very motivating for students. By reading literature, students can deal with human conflict and they can also relate it to their own experiences.

In addition to these three factors, we would include a fourth one, the growth of the student as an integral human being. Even the more specialized field of ESP has claimed success from the introduction of literature into its curriculum (Kelly & Krishnan, 1995). In the specific case of EST learners, the focus of higher education should foster the full development of the educated mind, and not limit itself to vocational skills which might hinder this development (Spack, 1985). Science students should become well-rounded professionals. By using literature in EST courses students are exposed to other methods of communication and other bodies of knowledge from which they can learn critical thinking transferable to other courses that demand logical reasoning, independent thinking and careful analysis of texts. In this sense, studying literature is just as important for engineers and physicists as it is for artists (Whiteson, 1996).

Some critics, however, have some arguments against the use of literature. First, they claim that literature is too complicated for students to learn the grammar of the language. Second, they say that literature is not the right tool to help students meet their academic objectives. Third, they refer to the difficulty ESL students may encounter trying to understand this genre (Mac Kay, 1986).

These arguments have no ground if teachers have a clear idea of what they want their students to achieve. With regard to the academic goals, for instance, one of the objectives of ESP courses is teaching rhetorical patterns. Widdowson (1979) introduced the concept of rhetorical patterns to characterize the way sentences are used to perform specific acts. In the specific case of EST, teaching English should be directed to teaching the system of the language used by technologists and scientists. In this sense, the discourse used by scientists includes such rhetorical acts as definition, description, classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, among others. Widdowson suggested that the selection of material should be based on the communicative or rhetorical acts. In other words, students should be made to realize the way language is used to express different acts of communication. Widdowson (1979) believes that teaching materials "should engage

the learner's active participation by making overt appeal to what he already knows" (p.63). We can ask ourselves: "What better way to engage the students' own knowledge and experience than literature? Mullen (1984) claims that using literature with EST students might offer several advantages because these texts could improve the students' skills in the four areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Reading is specifically mentioned since it is usually the main objective of these courses.

After reviewing the literature, we can conclude that there are several reasons to teach literature in EST or ESP classes if we take into consideration material selection, course objectives and students' interests.

This article discusses evidence that corroborates the arguments found in the literature. First of all, we would like to mention that we consider the **general interest essays** as literature and that is the reason they were chosen to use them with our students. We present findings that indicate that using literature, or in this case **general interest essays**, motivates students and at the same time, course objectives can also be met. We then propose some guidelines for classroom teaching.

## The Study

We asked ourselves these two questions:

- Can general interest essays be motivating to students?
- Can rhetorical patterns be found in these kinds of texts by EST students?

With these questions in mind, we decided to explore the possibility of using these kinds of essays in our EST courses, without interfering with the objectives of our courses which are to teach students the necessary skills needed to read and understand technical and scientific readings, while considering the students' interest in the subject. We knew that if students were not interested in these kinds of texts, no matter how complete they might be in linguistic terms, the experience would not be successful. Our first trimester students also take a course in Spanish literature (their mother tongue), and we knew that they had shown interest in the subject. However, we had not tried giving them these kinds of texts in English.

It is important to mention that besides being a motivating activity for the students, it would also be useful to reinforce some of the objectives of our course, that is, the teaching of rhetorical patterns. So, we decided to find out if what our learners studied through the technical and scientific texts would help them to understand the general interest essays.

## Method

This is a **descriptive study** carried out at Universidad Simón Bolívar, in Caracas, Venezuela, with 102 EST students (male and female) studying their first trimester at the university. The students' average age was 17.

The **general interest essays** used were taken from «The Short Prose Reader» (Muller and Wiener, 1989), which contains readings that present rhetorical patterns and signal words similar to those found in technical and scientific texts read by students in their reading classes. These texts present rhetorical patterns such as definition, description, classification, comparison, and contrast that have been studied in class and they also contain signal words—words that show the presence of these rhetorical patterns in the texts. For example one of the texts used was “Friends, Good Friends—And Such Good Friends” (Viorst, 1989). This text dealt with the way to classify your friends; and another “How Do We Find Students in a World of Academic Gymnasts and Working Ants?” (Baker, 1989), dealt with the different kinds of students that can be found at the university. These topics seemed relevant considering the students' interests at their age. Aebersold and Field (1997) believe that “...students usually respond well to stories about issues that are central to their own lives” (p.162). The texts were also selected following Widdowson's suggestion who claims that the selection of texts should be based on the rhetorical patterns (Widdowson, 1979), as these texts contained rhetorical patterns learned by students in class. We would like to mention once more that even though these texts are considered general interest essays, we considered them as literary or literary-like texts since they do not belong to the technical and scientific field.

A **questionnaire** was designed to answer our research questions (see Appendix A). The first part of this questionnaire consisted of two tasks comparing scientific and general interest texts. In the first task, students had to fill in a chart checking whether the rhetorical patterns and their corresponding signal words were found in the texts. The second task was an open question to compare these texts in terms of difficulty. They had to justify their answers. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of an open-ended attitudinal question where students had to express their feelings about reading these non-scientific texts.

## Procedure

During the term, students read scientific and technical texts for 11 weeks, during which time they were introduced to some rhetorical functions such as definition, description, classification, comparison and contrast, among others. In the last 3 weeks of the course, weeks 9 to 12, for two 100-minute classes, students were given some literary-like texts, using the same class methodology used with the scientific texts with pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities. The post-reading activities consisted of worksheets with comprehension tasks related to vocabulary and rhetorical patterns similar to the ones students had previously completed for scientific texts. (See Appendix B). At the end of the

as class on week 12, students were given the questionnaire to express their opinions and feelings about reading these non-scientific texts.

Our next step was to organize the information from the questionnaires and the data from the first task (part I) were grouped into frequencies (see Table 1). On the first question of the questionnaire students had to check whether they had found the rhetorical patterns taught in class in both kinds of texts. Percentage (%) refers to number of students who found those rhetorical patterns.

**Table 1. Students identification of rhetorical patterns in both kinds of texts**

	DEFINITION	CLASSIFICATION	DESCRIPTION	COMP. &CONT.
SCIENTIFIC TEXTS	20%	6%	7%	12%
LITERARY TEXTS	10 %	3 %	11 %	9 %
BOTH (Lit.&Scient.)	70 %	91 %	82 %	79 %

The answers to the second question in Part I, in which students had to compare scientific and literary-like texts in terms of difficulty, that is, which one was easier to understand?, were categorized in: Literary - Scientific - Undecided - No difference. These were then expressed in frequencies (see Table.2).

**Table 2. Texts identified as easier**

KIND OF TEXT	% OF STUDENTS
LITERARY	43
SCIENTIFIC	48
NO DIFFERENCE	7
UNDECIDED	2

The answers to the open-ended question in part II, which dealt with the students' feelings about reading literary-like texts, were, in the first place, analyzed and condensed under semantically similar headings. However, as it was impossible to separate most of the statements, it was finally decided to dichotomize the answers towards two extremes, positive and negative feelings, which were expressed in frequencies (see Table 3). All frequencies were finally expressed in percentages.

**Table 3. Feelings towards literary-like texts**

<b>FEELINGS</b>	<b>% OF STUDENTS</b>
NEGATIVE	37
POSITIVE	63

### Discussion

The results of the first question (part I) seem to indicate that students were able to find the rhetorical patterns known by them in both kinds of texts. Students were able to identify definitions, descriptions, classifications, comparisons and contrasts. They also found the signal words indicating each one of these rhetorical patterns. Between 71% to 91% of the students found that all the rhetorical patterns known by them were present in both kinds of texts. (See table 1 above). Some "teachers often express concern that in using literature with our students, we are exposing them to 'wrong' uses of language" (Lazar, 1993, p.18). Our results show that if students are used to analyzing discursive patterns, they can find these patterns in other kinds of discourse. And most important, students can be aware that rhetorical patterns are found in different genres.

In relation to the level of difficulty of the texts, the results were almost equally divided. 48% of the sample indicated that scientific texts are easier to understand, while 43% selected the literary-like texts as being easier. 7% decided they had the same level and 2% indicated that the level of difficulty depends on different aspects. Those that selected the scientific texts as easier mentioned that the main reason was their familiarity with technical vocabulary and structures, and that they considered the vocabulary in the literary-like texts to be more complicated. Those who selected the literary-like texts as easier to understand gave reasons such as "They use everyday language", "We can use our experiences to understand them".

As pointed out 48% found scientific texts easier to understand than literary-like ones. But it is important to mention that in the comprehension tasks (post-reading worksheets) where the subjects had to answer vocabulary and rhetorical patterns questions, 98% of the students completed all tasks correctly. (See Appendix B). As for the students' feelings towards literary-like texts, 63% have positive feelings towards them, while 37% have negative feelings. If we compare the results with those related to the level of difficulty, we can see that if 48% indicated scientific texts as easier, and 63%

showed positive feelings towards literary texts, it means that even though some students consider that literary-like texts are more difficult, some of those students have positive feelings towards them. Some of the things students said about the literary-like texts are that they can think about the topics and that they become involved in the story. This shows, as expressed by Lazar (1993), that by using the appropriate material students feel "that what they do in the classroom is relevant and meaningful to their own lives" ( p.15).

After carrying out this study and motivated by the results obtained, we have incorporated folk tales from different countries (Folktales around the World, Stern, 1996) into our EST classes to give our students the possibility to learn about different cultures while practicing the recognition of the rhetorical patterns learned in technical and scientific texts.

### **Implications for Classroom Teaching**

There are some considerations when using literary texts in ESP courses, which can contribute to the success of the experience. Most of them could be used in any EFL context.

- The main objective of using literary-like texts in ESP courses is to find a way of involving students in using their language skills in an active and creative way, not to teach students to write literature or to be critics of literature. Duff & Maley (1990) and Carter & Long (1986) have agreed on this point of view.
- The idea is to incorporate literary-like texts into the program to give students the opportunity to supplement their academic needs. Besides using authentic texts, students are learning about other cultures and can develop pleasure for reading. Aebersold & Field (1997) believe that "if fiction is used in the language class, it must serve the functions of teaching language and engaging the students"(p.156).

### **Selection of Materials:**

- Teachers should make a good selection of the material considering their students' levels, abilities and needs. Asking students preferences is highly advised (Lazar, 1994).

### **Classroom Methodology:**

- Classroom methodology should attract the specific motivation and intellectual capacity of the learners.
- Learning the differences between literary and technical and scientific texts can give teachers ideas to prepare the classes with literary texts. These different features are not only related to vocabulary or language, but to specific patterns found in every kind of discourse. (E.g. narrative, informative, poetry, etc.).
- Comparison and contrast of the different kinds of discourse found in literary texts and scientific readings will benefit students' awareness of how the language works in different contexts. For example, students can look for main ideas in informative, and narrative

- texts in poetry, while they will not find setting or plot in technical and scientific texts.
- When using narratives, for instance, the use of story maps and story grammars can help students retell the stories (Gonzalez, 1998)

### **General Recommendations:**

- Maintain interest and involvement through student-centered tasks. Group and pair work are to be fostered. By cooperating with each other, students can overcome linguistic difficulties.
- Motivate students to incorporate their experiences and background knowledge in the interpretation of texts.
- Motivate students to use the target language avoiding linguistic correction unless asked by students. If students speak in their native language while working in groups do not get annoyed, it means that they are involved in the task.
- Design pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities.

### **Pre-reading Activities:**

While we can generalize pre-reading strategies to be used with both literary and technical and scientific texts, there are some considerations to be taken into account before using them. Aebersold & Field (1997), mention some of them:

- Predicting content, or theme from titles, subtitles, headings, graphics, illustrations, can be used throughout the text in technical and scientific writings while in narrative texts, only titles may be available. Chapter titles and illustrations can be helpful when available.
- Learning topic-specific vocabulary before reading is very useful in scientific texts when we are dealing with concepts and in narrative texts when the theme is not familiar.
- Activating background knowledge is useful for both kinds of texts.
- Scanning for main ideas can be very useful in scientific texts but sometimes it can be hard in narrative ones if they are deeply embedded in the text.
- Skimming exercises may prove helpful in technical and scientific texts to have quick overview, but it is difficult to get the plot and character development from skimming.
- Conceptual mapping may prove helpful for both types of texts.

### **While-reading Activities:**

- Prepare handouts with comprehension questions, and/or graphic organizers according to the rhetorical pattern for students to complete with information from the text.
- Prepare students to use metacognitive strategies to check their own reading.
- Have students read in pairs and ask each other questions while they read.

### Post-reading Activities:

- Have students discuss and give opinions about the text.
- Divide the class into four groups. Have students, in each group, prepare questions; then have another group answer the questions and a third group checks if the questions were correctly answered and finally have the original group check the answers and corrections. Discuss questions and answers with the whole class.
- Prepare cloze-summaries for students to complete.
- Ask hypothetical questions: "if you were the author, how would you end the story?"

These are some general suggestions which can be enriched with activities adapted from recent books about literature in language teaching, and with teachers' own ideas and student suggestions.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study support what we had found in the literature: literature, or in our case general **interest essays** can be used in EST courses, and the majority of the subjects showed positive feelings towards reading these kinds of texts in class. During the classes where these texts were used, students were eager to participate by expressing their opinions and relating the themes to their personal experiences. At the same time, while reading, they shared comments with classmates about the texts. In this way, our two questions were answered: our students were motivated by literary-like texts, and they were able to identify the rhetorical patterns they had already learned when reading scientific texts. They were also able to answer questions that required the comprehension of these patterns.

Even though this classroom-based study was carried out with the purpose of improving our class practice, our results bring up a controversial issue which we think is important to mention: skill transfer. Transfer has been defined, in learning theory, as "... the carrying over of learned behavior from one situation to another" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1997, p.386). In our case, we could be talking about a positive transfer of skills from one genre (scientific and technical texts) to another (literary-like texts). Being that both kinds of genres were used with the same community, the direction of the transfer was from the more rhetorically accessible genre to a less accessible one, and that there was an awareness of rhetorical patterns involved in the transfer. So we could say that our case meets the conditions for a positive transfer to take place. Other authors, like Selinker and Douglas (in press), believe that positive transfer across genres is harder than across different kinds of activities. We can argue that Selinker and Douglas are dealing with transfer from L1 to L2, while, in our case, our students seemed to transfer skills learned in one genre to another genre within the L2, so they were not transferring from one language to another but merely from one genre to another. All this discussion shows the need for research in this area.

From our experience with the inclusion of these kinds of essays in our EST/EFL reading classes, we can say that apart from being a motivational element, and a way to enhance the practice of classroom objectives, it is a way to contribute to the formation of well-rounded professionals and human beings.

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**APPENDIX A****QUESTIONNAIRE**

COMPARE THE LITERARY-LIKE TEXTS YOU HAVE READ IN THE LAST CLASSES WITH THE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL TEXTS YOU READ IN THE PREVIOUS WEEKS.

**PART I:**

1.-Check the kind of text where you found the following patterns

	SCIENTIFIC	LITERARY	BOTH	NONE	SIGNAL WORDS
DEFINITION					
DESCRIPTION					
COMPARISON AND CONTRAST					
CLASSIFICATION					

2.-Compare scientific texts with literary texts in terms of difficulty. Which one was easier for you to understand? Justify your answer.

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**PART II:**

1.- How did you feel about reading a literary text?

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**APPENDIX B****WORKSHEET WITH LITERARY POST READING ACTIVITIES**

AFTER READING THE TEXT "FRIENDS, GOOD FRIENDS - AND SUCH GOOD FRIENDS", COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING EXERCISES:

- VOCABULARY: FIND ANTONYMS FOR THE FOLLOWING WORDS:

A.- Harsh \_\_\_\_\_

B.- Mutual \_\_\_\_\_

C.- Crucial \_\_\_\_\_

D.- Intimacy \_\_\_\_\_

E.- Tolerate \_\_\_\_\_

II.- DICTIONARY USAGE The derivation of a word (how it originated and where it came from) can make you more aware of its meaning. Look up the following words to determine their origins:

A.- Psychology \_\_\_\_\_

B.-Historical \_\_\_\_\_

C.- Sibling \_\_\_\_\_

D.-Christmas \_\_\_\_\_

E.- Sexual \_\_\_\_\_

III.- DEFINITION

What's the author's definition of friendship in the first two paragraphs?

IV.- COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

1.- In what way are "convenience friends" and "special friends" alike?

2.- Are "historical friends" and "crossroad friends" different? Explain.

V.- CLASSIFICATION

1.- How does the author classify her friends?

2.- How would you classify your friends? Draw a classification diagram