



Teaching *Twilight* in the EFL Classroom: Avoiding Possible Pitfalls and How to Use It in a Positive Manner

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ABSTRACT

Using literature in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom can be a great tool to promote love of reading or enlarge our students' vocabulary but the students' needs, interests, English level and age must be also taken into account. Using canonical works such as Shakespeare's plays or Virginia Woolf's works may be of little reading interest for our students. For that reason, in the following essay, we propose using *Twilight* to teach Secondary education students in Spain (Bachillerato and E.S.O.- Educación Secundaria Obligatoria). We will use *Twilight*, the first novel in the series by Stephenie Meyer, so as not to overwhelm our students with reading the four novels that make up the series. Given the scope of this paper, we will similarly focus on the novels, not on the movies, although many students may be already familiar with the movies. The use of *Twilight* in the classroom may be fraught with concerns that the series of novels have raised about the limited roles presented to female characters, the protagonist's lack of independence, the similarities between the novels' love interests and domestic abusers ... For those reasons, we propose the use of *Twilight* to discuss issues such as the reliability (or unreliability) of first-person narrators, and, moreover, the reliability of one's perceptions of the world. We hope to use the novels as a way to discuss concerns of our students in regards to their self-confidence or their perception of themselves, in a positive manner, fostering positive images for our teenage students, a stage of life characterized by difficulties, many changes and turbulent thoughts.

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Despite its immense popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Twilight* series also encountered a number of criticisms, especially from those who considered that it presented an anti-feminist, patriarchal view of womanhood, offering young readers a negative and traditional view of women's limited roles in contemporary society. Therefore, the choice of using this particular series in the EFL classroom may appear as unfortunate, or at least risky, as it will be shown below.

The original *Twilight* series comprises four novels – *Twilight* (2005), *Eclipse* (2006), *New Moon* (2007), *Breaking Dawn* (2008).¹ This essay focuses on *Twilight*, the first novel in the series.² The reason for this choice is that *Twilight* presents fewer problems with the representation of young females and their dependence on their love interests. Also, due to time constraints and because of the need to fit in the reading of a novel in the school curriculum, it would be too time-consuming to have students read as many as four novels (if we do not take into account the extra works). In *Twilight*, Bella meets and falls in love with Edward, which reads like a traditional fairy tale, in contrast to the dangerous suicidal thoughts that she experiences when Edward moves away from Forks in *New Moon*. We will show that, despite potential problems, the reading of *Twilight* and its use in the EFL classroom can help with the learning of English and, in the process, give our students confidence. The educational context for this proposal is in Spain, where the number of suicides reached an alarming peak in 2022. Moreover, Spanish “young people are the ones who think most about taking their own lives and try to do so. However, the most successful are older people,” in the words of expert Alejandro de la Torre (Llach).

Although it can be argued that there exist other novels that fit in best with most pedagogical guidelines, the use of *Twilight* in an EFL classroom finds its way through the need for the development of an education that is more updated with society and the present time. Nowadays teaching takes on a much more human, personalised, and conscious approach to the problems that concern today's life. This is largely due to 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of people everywhere” (Ministry of Social Rights and 2030 Agenda), whose implementation in education is here to stay. In the Spanish education system the Royal Decree 217/2022 provides for the key competences of the European Recommendation, which are linked to the main global challenges of the twenty-first century that pupils will be confronted with.

In the following paragraphs, we shall justify why using *Twilight* in the EFL classroom can be useful in addressing some of the goals of 2030 Agenda as well as those relevant key competences.

2 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

Despite the benefits of using literary texts to teach a foreign language, literature is virtually non-existent in ESL/EFL classrooms. Even when legislation refers to the use of literature in the curriculum, as it is the case with Spanish compulsory secondary education (ESO) or Baccalaureate programs (Bachillerato), literature is still largely absent, due to time limitations and students' English level (Ortells 91–92). In this sense, there are authors who openly claim that excluding literature in EFL language classes is appropriate (Tseng 61), and that English literature has not been considered a useful teaching tool in the EFL classrooms because teaching a second language has largely been regarded as a matter of linguistics (Alemi 177). Khatib et al. argue that “some English language teachers are not cognizant of those user-friendly literary texts, techniques and procedures of implementing literature in their classes” (213). Therefore, the role of teachers as a facilitator (Kooy and Chiu 84; Van 9) is of paramount importance as they must use adequate strategies to increase students' interest and prompt discussion to make literature an integral part of the English learning process.

¹ For clarity's sake, by *Twilight* we refer to the four-book series whereas by *Twilight* (in italics) we refer to the 2005 novel.

² There is also a novella that can be read independently, *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* (2010), about a young vampire who participates in the battle at the end of *New Moon*.

Students are required to read literature in their native language, but we should avoid using classics of literature on their own. Not only because of language constraints but also because “books chosen by adults might lack relevance to the lives of contemporary teenagers” (Beach et al. 31, qtd. in A. Sanders 2). In the English class we should aim at exploring Young Adult Literature, “since its words, linguistic structures and subject matter are consistent with the required vocabulary and grammatical level of this age-group of learners” (Ortells 95). Moreover, the topics explored in Young Adult Literature are more likely to appeal to students’ tastes. In this regard, Tseng argues that students’ preferences are contemporary literature rather than classic literature, and such works as movie novels, realistic fiction, fantasies, and mysteries are their favourite (61). As Van (8–9) contends, the choice of texts and activities is crucial since it will make the difference between passive reading and active involvement with a literary text. In Bagherkazemi and Alemi’s words, “in order to succeed as a language learning asset, literature must first effect a literary experience in learners” (8). In this regard, Widdowson states that students must have the opportunity to experience literature for themselves, as well as share their unique perspectives with teachers (76, qtd. in Preston 490). As something new can be learned about a literary work each time it is examined, the importance of whole text processing strategies and the use of the reader’s own knowledge in constructing meaning must be emphasised (Carrell and Eisterhold 556, qtd. in Spack 706; Pugh 321).

Innumerable benefits regarding the use of literature in the classroom have been identified, as Bagherkazemi and Alemi (3) put forth when they recognise that studying literature in the EFL classroom is advantageous for several reasons: it provides meaningful contexts; it involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues, and prose; it appeals to the imagination and enhances creativity; it develops cultural awareness; it encourages critical thinking; and it is in line with CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) as the main focus of the approach to literature is to make learners understand the intention and expression of writers. On the part of the learners, they should end up knowing not just more about the work than about the world around them, so literature should expand their wisdom and provide them with a new way of looking at themselves and the world outside the classroom (Harper 407, qtd. in Tarvin and Al-Arishi 35).

Alemi (178) points out the language and cultural enrichment literature brings, as well as the benefits of using authentic material. The author proposes five criteria in selecting texts from literary works: language proficiency, time availability, cultural competence, short stories, and personal involvement. Once these criteria are borne in mind, teachers should try to implement the most appropriate teaching approach in the L2 classroom favouring the use of short stories; however, in our proposal we believe that the reading of a whole novel, provided the students’ level is adequate, can be as fruitful (or more, as a novel gives students the possibility to better empathise with the characters). The methodological approach (Alemi 179–180) should include warm-up, pre-reading, comprehension, vocabulary, and follow-up activities. Khatib and colleagues (216–218) review some methodological approaches to teaching literature and uphold a task-based one covering a number of different procedures in three phases: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Gajdusek (231), quoted in Bagherkazemi and Alemi (10), suggest four levels: pre-reading work, factual in-class work, analysis, and extended activities. These phases are relevant to the study of literature in the EFL classroom since they promote a holistic understanding of the work done in class.

In the academic literature, examples of activities that foster the aforementioned methodological approaches can be found. Chalikendy (229–233) offers sample materials to carry out learner-centred tasks including warming-up, predicting, skimming, and scanning activities, jigsaw reading, vocabulary, writing and grammar activities, and role plays. Amer (66–70) utilises story maps, story frames, and reading logs, setting out a developmental model of a reader-response approach, which includes six levels (literal understanding, empathy, analogy, interpretation, evaluation of fiction, and recognition).

There are also empirical studies as to teaching literature, such as Yimwilai’s study (14–20) which evaluates the effectiveness of an integrated approach in EFL classrooms and how it relates to students’ achievements, critical thinking skills, and attitudes toward reading literature. An integrated approach is referred to as one in which learners learn by doing in a learner-centred environment in learner-interest contexts. The conclusions of Yimwilai’s study indicate that this

approach is the most effective since students' critical thinking skills can become significantly higher, and it can be applied to those students who have different levels of English proficiency, environments, and cultures.

2.2 VAMPIRE CULTURE AND THE IMPACT OF TWILIGHT

Having put forth the benefits of literature in the secondary education curriculum, highlighting some methods and strategies that are appropriate when teaching literature to youngsters, we shall now provide a more detailed insight into the work in focus—*Twilight*—as well as into the (vampire) popular culture beliefs and values that support it.

Vampires are a reflection of the mental state of Western society and, in a way, a coping mechanism to the threats against our existence (Sellers 80). Regularly coming in and out of fashion, from a historical perspective, the resurgence of vampires tends to coincide with periods marked by increased social anxiety (Bohn 36–37). *Twilight*, published only a few years after September 11, a time of uncertainty and social fear, seemed to tap into the contemporary mindset.

Meyer received much criticism because of her rewriting of vampires. Hers do not sleep in coffins or stay away from sunlight; they are fangless and garlic has no effect on them. Actually, they sparkle. Most significantly, they can survive on a blood-free diet, the most significant departure from the blood-sucking myth of vampires. Meyer acknowledged these changes and gave them no importance, stating that her vampires are original rather than grounded on previous representations—“the only time I really did any research on vampires was when the character Bella did research on vampires. Because I was creating my own world, I didn't want to find out just how many rules I was breaking” (E. Sanders). These changes can be due to the process of adaptation that stories undergo. In the words of Linda Hutcheon:

adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon.... Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation—in their ‘offspring’ or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish. (qtd. in Santos et al. iii)

More importantly, *Twilight* permeated teenage popular culture decisively. For teenage readers, the fact that Meyer's vampires departed from the tradition of Bram Stoker's or classical Hollywood movies was unimportant. The power of popular culture texts is twofold in that “these texts do not just reflect current understandings about the world. Instead, the texts help create the world,” which makes their critical examination all the more necessary (Happel and Esposito 526). Therefore, given their power, we should critically examine them.

While *Twilight* exudes sex in the form of sexual tension between the protagonist couple, the books are “clean”—kisses are kept to a minimum and sex is post-marital. What they offer instead is:

[T]he romance and tension that attend abstinence: yearning and unfulfilled passion far more exciting than any amount of raw pornography. The passion within and produced by the books may be likened to a form of “rapture”—a term that connotes the extreme pleasure and joy of orgasm. The pleasure, as Cowie emphasises, comes not in the conclusion; in fact, most readers express extreme dissatisfaction with the depiction of the eventual culmination. Rather, it is the tossing and turning in between, the pages upon pages of dithering over how, and when, sex will occur, that most clearly constitutes *Twilight*'s mise-en-scene of desire. (Petersen 57)

Moreover,

The *Twilight* saga clearly promotes traditional heteronormative values. Carlisle Cullen is the strong patriarch, Esme Cullen is the serene emotional center of the family, and Edward Cullen endures decades of abstinence and loneliness to save himself for the one woman he can love for eternity. ... Bella as an exemplar of the traditional female: meek, submissive, and domesticated. (Nelson 4)

Twilight is a *Bildungsroman* where we see teenage Bella growing up. That this growing-up process culminates in her embracing becoming a wife and a mother has been problematised,

as she foregoes more typical rites of passage (for contemporary standards), such as going to college or becoming a professional, contenting herself with the role of “a classic, passive romantic heroine” instead (Diamond 47).

We will use the novel to tackle Goal 5 of the ODS, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In the light of the traditional, patriarchal system that *Twilight* offers, which seems more reminiscent of the 1950s than of the twenty-first century, we shall address career choices for women and how there are other possible lifestyles apart from the one prescribed by *Twilight*—the woman as helpmeet and homemaker.

The series not only gained public approval (all of the novels in the series became best-sellers), but also enjoyed certain critical acclaim—*Twilight* was named one of the Best Children’s Books of 2005 by *School Library Journal* and identified as “Best Book of the Year” by *Publishers Weekly*, in addition to being named one of the “Top Books of 2008” by *USA Today*. In 2009, *New Moon* won the “Young Reader’s Choice Award”.

For Christian and conservative groups, the series was appealing for its traditional values, abhorring premarital sex and promoting abstinence and self-control (Collins and Carmody 384–385). The presence of supernatural beings (not only vampires but also werewolves) did not raise any criticisms. This stood in marked contrast to American conservative groups’ accusations that Harry Potter promoted witchcraft. Kathryn Darden pointed out that “one reason for the division is that witches are specifically condemned in the Bible, while vampires are not even mentioned” (qtd. in Karolides et al. 426). This is significant, for traditionally, vampires had stood for immoral behaviour and

illicit desires, allowing the writers to talk about sexuality in a way that otherwise cannot be done. Even in the absence of explicit descriptions of sexual acts, nineteenth-century vampire stories offered their authors the opportunity to hint at, or even revel in, a variety of sexual transgressions. (Nakagawa)

In contrast, in *Twilight* vampires are moral and display heteronormative, conservative values. Vampires usually are either fascinating or a figure of scorn, but Meyer’s are positive role models, with their values and traditional family, and even desirable, given their physical beauty and their massive wealth—they drive sports cars and have designer label clothes (Pearlman 23).

Yet, despite the support of conservative groups, feminists found fault with the novel. In October 2008 there was a decision in the Capistrano unified school district in California to remove all copies of the series from the libraries in their 12 middle schools. The decision was overturned just four days later (Karolides et al. 425). While vampires have much changed since their first literary representations, their female objects of desire have notably remained mostly unchanged, being passive (Gómez-Galisteo, “The *Twilight* of Vampires” 166).

Meyer should not be entirely credited with this view of vampires successfully living in society, as this first appeared in Anne Rice’s vampire novels. Different from Rice’s and other vampires, Meyer’s do not feel dissatisfied with their condition; just the opposite, as human Bella desperately looks forward to becoming one herself. Through the series, spectators see how “Bella rejects human society in favor of the fairy tale her vampire lover can provide. She must become a vampire because the Cullens are better, more moral, more beautiful, wealthier, and wiser than the rest of Forks. Bella embodies the American desire to be the strongest, the wealthiest—the best” (Pearlman 23).

3 – DISCUSSION

3.1 USING TWILIGHT IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

In her proposal for using *Twilight* in a EFL framework with Spanish high school students, secondary school teacher Sánchez-Cuervo had the students, among other tasks, counteract *Twilight*’s harmful gender roles, by replaying some excerpts from the book, with Bella and Edward reversing roles. *Twilight* has been accused of offering a sugar-coated, misleading portrayal of potential abuse in a couple, but there are instances in the book in which we see Edward in a less flattering way. For instance:

Although Bella is adamant that Edward is one of the “good guys,” Meyer unknowingly uses Bella to alert readers to some of Edward’s rather substantial flaws. For example, the book focuses on Edward’s careful control of his instincts to kill Bella, but his behavior in the novel is erratic at best. No less than seven times does Bella describe Edward’s eyes, face, and voice as being “cold” (64, 82, 86, 174, 184, 186, 381) towards her following civilised or encouraging gestures on Edward’s part; she even goes so far as to note that his mood changes are “unpredictable” (211). This kind of inconsistency reminds readers that Edward is truly a dangerous character, especially in comparison to Dracula. (Cantanzarite 89)

In *Twilight*, women are dependent on men. What is more, women do not show much willpower either, as Bella is unable to control the reactions that Edward causes in her (Cantanzarite 90-92). Bella’s point of view is the one that narrates the novel, but she does not occupy a central position. She does not initiate things, but rather, things happen to her. She “casts herself as a character in a narrative not of her making. She retells her quest self-consciously in relation to inherited romance tales, but does not foreground any essential changes she is making to the ‘fairy-tale’ paradigm. Rather, she sees herself as the victim of a tale that, for her, has run out of plot once Edward leaves her: ‘I wasn’t the heroine any more ... my story was over’ (Meyer 106)” (Diamond 48).

Twilight shows the “feeling of being sexually aroused by danger or by the threat of physical harm inflicted on the female protagonist” (Gómez-Galisteo, “Vampire Meets Girl” 3). Far from finding the danger that proximity to Edward places her in alarming, Bella finds it titillating. Moreover, misunderstandings are recurrent, proving a lack of communication.

Bella’s only occupation for most of the series is to risk her life in order to help her beloved ones (Seltzer). Human life is dangerous for women (as exemplified by the pasts of Esme, Rosalie and Alice) (Wilson 71), the only solution being becoming a vampire. This, however, is not so straightforward. In exchange for Edward’s protectiveness against external threats (werewolves, other vampires), Bella is accepting his violence, turning the series into “an ongoing social excusing of men’s violence” (McDaniel 1-2). As already mentioned, we will create debate to tackle goal 5 of the ODS. Moreover, in so doing, we will tackle goal 4: Quality Education. We are not seeking just to teach English to our students, but to offer them quality education that will help them further in their life. For this purpose, we shall extract the passages that allude to macho behaviour and discuss as a group how to deal with and try to overcome them.

While discourses of feminine success and empowerment exist and are resonant with women, they do not seem to have reached girls, which explains the popularity of *Twilight* (Jarvis 104). It is typical that “the abuser will often pressure the woman to commit to the relationship in such a way that she may later feel very guilty or feel she is letting him down” (Walker, qtd. in Salmi 5). Similarly, despite recent awareness of domestic abuse, the fact that controlling Edward is a desirable partner for Bella but, more alarmingly, for thousands of readers, is disturbing. Thus, “the successful acceptance of the novel as representing ideal romance in contemporary popular culture has raised significant questions about the remaining fluidity of meaning in violent behavior between intimates despite over thirty years of anti-violence advocacy and legislation” (McDaniel 1). Worryingly, teenagers see violence as a manifestation of love (Vezina et al., qtd. in Collins and Carmody 384).

In their analysis of physical violence in *Twilight*, Collins and Carmody found that situations involving physical violence or threats of immediate physical violence were identified 80 times across the series, and 30% of the physical violence was perpetrated by a male in the course of an intimate relationship. Within this category, 66.7% of the violence was perpetrated by Edward on Bella and 33.3% was perpetrated by Jacob on Bella. Throughout the series, references are made to Edward’s desire to drink Bella’s blood, either as a mechanism that allows Edward to control both Bella’s behaviour and the course of their relationship or as a reminder of the power differential between the two characters. Physical violence also occurs when Edward attempts to protect Bella from harming herself or from being harmed by others. Although Edward’s intention is not to harm Bella, she suffers from physical harm on 16 (20%) occasions, and Bella is the victim of 96 instances of secondary violence in the book series. (Collins and Carmody 387-388). This is without mentioning Bella’s low self-esteem and scarce

confidence, which drive her to consider suicide when Edward leaves her in *New Moon* (Collins and Carmody 389).³

What we propose is a reading of *Twilight* that questions the reliability of the first-person narrator. Bella presents herself as clumsy and unattractive, the odd one in Arizona, unpopular and not fitting in her *milieu*. However, the move to her father's home is not the dreadful outcome that she was expecting. Far from being a mere change of location, moving to Washington means Bella is adopting a new *persona*, one that is much more attractive. Her new popularity makes us question whether her negative self-description is inaccurate, as she soon makes new friends and is part of a very active social circle. Not only that, she attracts Edward's attention and starts a romantic relationship.

If we focus our attention to the beginning of the novel, we read:

I'd never fit in anywhere ... I didn't relate well to people my age. Maybe the truth was that I didn't relate well to people, period. ... Sometimes I wondered if I was seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. Maybe there was a glitch in my brain. (Meyer 9–10)

In the quotation above, we see Bella's acute insecurity, perceiving herself in the light of a serious lack of confidence. Her words, however, are soon proved wrong when she becomes a very popular student in Forks and quickly makes new friends. This can lead to classroom discussion of the perceptions of ourselves and how others see us. Moreover, in the second part of the quotation we can see the sense teenagers have of being unique, standing apart from everybody else, perceiving things differently. This can also help foster classroom discussion about the perception of reality. Bella's misrepresentation of her own personality and looks will help us introduce in the classroom a double-fold idea: on the one hand, the reliability of first-person narrators and, on the other, it will help us examine teenage students' frequent lack of self-confidence, based on erroneous impressions about themselves. That way, we will use *Twilight* to boost our students' confidence, hence meeting the purposes of 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Quality Education (no. 4), and Gender Equality (no. 5).

The use of *Twilight* in the classroom seeks to promote and strengthen a culture based on respect for others, inclusion and democratic ideas and solidarity. Educating in values means extending the scope of education so that it is not limited to teaching and learning subjects, skills and agendas, setting goals related to the moral and civic sphere, with the ultimate goal of forming responsible citizens. In the current environment, characterised by social complexity and economic and cultural globalization, educating in values becomes an essential issue in order to form citizens who are capable of taking on new challenges and actively committing themselves, playing an active and effective role in the construction of a much more just, inclusive, equitable and intercultural world.

4 – CONCLUSIONS

Literature should be a source of inspiration and analysis in the secondary education curriculum. However, teachers must adapt the way they work with the contents so that students do not find literature tedious. Some studies favour the use of supplementary media materials capitalizing on Internet resources to prepare plot summaries of novels and plays (Tseng 61). In the Spanish Education System, the *Royal Decree 217/2022* includes multilingual competence and competence in cultural awareness and expressions as key competences, so literature is a tool that, properly used and with the appropriate scaffolding, should have a prominent place in the official curriculum and the classroom practice bearing in mind students' tastes, interests and hobbies and their linguistic proficiency and cultural background.

If students encounter comprehension problems either for linguistic reasons or because they do not have sufficient knowledge of literature, teachers should allow using interpretations of literature through other media, such as music, pictures, or films. Literature can sharpen linguistic and cognitive skills and provides for some deepening of the student's understanding

3 "Throughout the series, there are 60 references to self-harm or suicide. The majority of these thoughts and behaviors (60.67%) are Bella's" (Collins and Carmody 389).

of the human condition promoting competence-based learning. In doing so, teachers should focus on the creation of authentic situations to implement a meaningful language experience, so that students can personalise the text by discussing similar situations which have happened to them. The benefit of this is the possibility of integration of other skills such as writing and oral practice employing dramatizations, simulations, and role-playing, as well as grammar and vocabulary through communicative tasks and activities, thus boosting motivation on the part of the learners.

In regard to the methodological approach to teaching literature, there seems to be consensus on a task-based approach using pre-task, during-task, and post-task activities. In selecting materials teachers should give preference to using simplified texts, easy texts, and young adult texts. Nevertheless, all of these efforts to successfully implement literature in the English classroom are contingent upon students' interest and enthusiasm for the material used in the class, the level of their persistence with the learning tasks, and the level of their concentration and enjoyment (Van 9).

We believe that through the use of authentic literature, students will be more motivated to read than they are when they read adapted texts, most of which are adaptations of classic literature works in English (Austen's works or Shakespeare's plays figure prominently). Students will gain a sense of personal satisfaction and confidence in their English reading skills by reading "a real novel," not an adaptation. Moreover, by tackling goals 4 and 5 of the ODS in our literature teaching approach, we are providing meaningful learning. Twilight represents a valuable and effective example of how the tenets embodied in goal 4 of ODS—achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls—can be acutely discussed in literature classes, meeting thus the demands of a globalised world, in which individuals struggle to find their own place as human beings. Hence, literature provides a sense of belonging and identity.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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