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How Literature Fulfils the Function of the Native Environment*

Key words: literature in language learning, (ways of) reading, a decline in reading; context, kinds of contexts: the context of situation, the context of culture and co-text, and their role in understanding; the three contexts and the potentialities of literature to replace the native environment

The problem which has initiated the present paper is related to the changing practices in studies and reading. Despite international reading groups on air and on the web¹ and despite the recent methodological publications promoting literature in language learning (cf.: Simpson, 1996; Montgomery, Durant et al, 2006) , literature seems to be losing in contest with the Internet as a rival. Young people tend to give preference to natural language from the Internet sites and corpuses, young teachers give preference to dictionaries based on electronic corpuses, students are not reluctant to read the prescribed authors in translation when short of time and nobody gives preference to language and literature courses over a trip to an English speaking country. General reluctance to reading has been deplored by teachers and authors, old readers and writers². In this context, even dedicated teachers reconsider their pursuits and methodologies. The present paper analyses and explains how and why literature has preserved its linguistic and sociocultural influence no less powerful than that of the native environment and why its potential remains beyond question. Apart from its contemporary relevance, this paper celebrates the tradition of the Department of English Philology, University of Vilnius, in teaching English through literature in the 1970s to the 1980s (cf.: Drazdauskiene, 1986).

This paper has been based on contemporary linguistic theory, on the study of language and literature, on classroom and academic research (Drazdauskiene, 1992). Most of the observations have been based on the engagement with British and American literature in language practice classes with university undergraduates whose written papers, apart from literature, have

* This paper was read at the Conference marking the 40th anniversary of the Department of English Philology and of the Department of German Philology, University of Vilnius, 18-20 September 2008.

¹ Cf.: The World Book Club on the BBC World Service; the Extensive Reading Foundation – <http://www.erfoundation.org>; the ELT e-Reading Group – <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-literature-creative-reading-eltreading=htm>, and resources on the web: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/resources/britlit>.

² What cannot be supplied with references are the general complaints of school teachers and educated parents of the children's reluctance to read today. Many an author has deplored this attitude to reading in the press (cf. partly: Sigitas Birgelis. 20 Poezijos pavasarių Punksko ir Seinų krašte // *Literatūra ir menas*, Nr. 20, 2006m. gegužės 19, p. 3 ir 22; Edvardas Rimkus ir Lilijana Katilevičiūtė. Eilėraštis – laiko sukury // *Literatūra ir menas*, Nr.29, 2006m. liepos 21, p. 20); cf.: Kadepurkar, 2008. There have been authors who sought an explanation of the reluctance to read while drawing a parallel between the desire of possession in the twentieth century, and reading. It was found that possession postponed the reading of the books owned and dulled the pleasure. The advice was made therefore that „the will to possess must be quieted at the core or regenerative pleasure will be denied us“ (Kerr, 1965, 237; 227-229). Cf. also: Milosz, 1996, 29; Doris Lessing, 1981, xviii). However, there is also the reading public. It is being served, interviewed and respected in libraries and schools (cf.: A.Poškutė. Skaitymo metais – vaikai be bibliotekų? // *Lietuvos žinios*, 2008.04.26, Nr. 94, p. 11). Researchers found out even the likes and dislikes of schoolchildren in reading the prescribed literature (cf.: the Seminar of the Children's Sector of the Mažvydas National Library in Vilnius, 16 December 2005). The observation has been that children do not take over the sanctioned assessments as unquestionable values. They rather rate the prescribed authors on their own. Thus while the children appreciate such books as *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger, *Nothing New on the Western Front* by Remarque, *Notre Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo, *The Da Vinci Code* by Paulo de Quailo, *Heroin* by Burgess and others, they plainly do not like *Prie užvertos langinės* by Žemaitė, *Milžino paunksmė* by Balys Sruoga, *Vėlinės* by Adomas Mickevičius, *Pragiedruliai* by Vaižgantas, *Satyros* by Vincas Kudirka, *Riešutų duona* by Šaltenis and others, take it or leave it.

been the basic research material. This is an analytical paper deliberating the potential of literature in the framework of functional linguistics and classical education.

I intend to argue that literature can fulfil the role of the native environment and the conditions required are not hard to meet. I would begin by saying that the skeptical attitudes as described above merit alteration because the causes that have led to them had not been personal whims of stubborn young people or ignorant teachers. There must have been natural and social reasons there. What is natural is the inclination towards an authentic routine rather than to fictitious language. This natural favour must have been formed by inexperience and youthful taste, methodologically one-sided emphasis on the success of ESP and the tempo of life. It must have been furthermore influenced by the freedom of movement in conditions of globalization, the spread of crude behaviour, of consumption policies over the arts, sophistication and learning, and by the general deterioration of social refinement. The emphasis on ferocious gain, property and material values has shifted all people's inclinations in favour of pragmatism and away from humanitarian engagements one of which is reading. Whether for the pleasure of pastime or learning, reading has not been forsaken but its present function has turned precarious. Simultaneously, though, an English philosopher who has published on literature and philosophy in recent years has argued that "without poetry (or literature, or music, or history, or even theology) we cannot hope to understand our humanity". Science never accomplishes human understanding "as it cannot truly explain what it means to be human" (Midgley, 2006).

My basic thesis is that the time tested value of imaginative literature is especially significant in foreign language studies because, apart from its aesthetic value, it can ultimately substitute for the native environment with a fair result, whatever its other uses in the field. This is a major claim but this potential of imaginative literature can be shown to be credible. Its theoretical foundation derives from the concept of context. If one adheres to the theoretical principles of the functional theory of language, one will not question the dependence of meaning on context. The postulate that meaning is function in context has been the unquestionable founding notion in functional linguistics. The role of context in understanding may be said to be beyond doubt³. But the concept of context is helpful in giving the phenomenon of meaning an overall explanation.

Any person engaged in foreign language study is familiar with the power of context in determining the meaning of words and structures. This is the tested knowledge and experience to all, beginning with an intelligent young student and finishing with an experienced lexicographer. There has even been known a cunning assessment claiming that an exhaustive inventory of the meanings of the word is virtually an inventory of the contexts of its use, and saying this is not going far wrong.

In appreciating the potentialities of literature, one finds the concept of context to be a major reference. As contemporary studies in functional linguistics have shown, several contexts have evolved in verbal communication in its cultural environment. Three kinds of context have been identified and exhaustively defined in recent studies (Halliday, Hasan, 1990). They are the context of situation, the context of culture and co-text. These categories of context apply when one attempts to explain why literature, which is as passive and mute a resource as sheet music, can not only reflect the native environment but also replace it and bequeath cultural refinement on the reader.

The ever so important context of situation, which is the environment or "the context in which the text unfolds" (Halliday, Hasan, 1990, 11) is the essential and immediately determining context without which understanding is impossible. One could consider, for instance, how much a lay foreigner understands in reading *The White House Transcripts* (Gold, 1974) if one attempted it himself using only the book and no additional contextual information. One can therefore also smile at the weight of President Nixon's words "I want them out. Get going", which sanctioned the

³ Cf.: "... we should be surprised at the success (i.e. of communication – MLD). /.../ How do we explain the success with which people communicate? /.../ We make predictions - ... - about what the other person is going to say next; and that's how we understand what he or she does say. /.../ ...how do we make these predictions? The first step towards an answer is: we make them from the context of situation" (Halliday, Hasan, 1990, 9-10).

publication. The President may have known that the publication would not mean a thorough public understanding of what the telephone conversations from the White House were about and indeed it did not. This means therefore that the context of situation is absolutely essential in understanding.

Thinking of imaginative literature, one becomes aware that the context of situation is built in into every narrative innumerable times irrespective of whether it is a classical work like *The Return of the Native* by Thomas Hardy or *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald, or a modern novel like *The Realms of Gold* by Margaret Drabble or *The Shipping News* by Annie Proulx. Although in theory, the context of situation is a relatively abstract concept and means only types of situations, in fiction like in natural communication, the context of situation means actual factors related to the ongoing verbal communication, such as participants, their action, other relevant features of the situation, such as the surrounding objects, events, etc, effects of the verbal action and others. These are concrete conditions of the environment, and any dedicated student in languages and literature remembers how rich in detail and how colourful contextual descriptions in fiction are⁴. What is important to note here is that fiction does provide the environment to every situation beyond doubt and shortage of detail.

What is more, is that the context of situation(s) is complete in fiction which is never the condition in reality, especially to the foreigner. Since fiction is not only finished but also an accomplished text, its general context and the contexts of situations in it are complete. This is an exceptional and favourable condition to understanding and learning. It means that any foreign reader who is attentive has all conditions required to understand the meaning available. He can read forward and backward, stop and remember and, putting what he discovers in the text together, get the precise meaning in context. No realistic situation offers so much opportunities to the participant. Minding the language with the aid of which the reader has to process the meaning, imaginative literature obviously engages the mind, the memory and the intelligence of the reader as he struggles to understand what he is reading.

Apart from the context(s) of situation(s) in literary work, there is the context of the situation of the work. It involves the prehistory of the work, the author's preparatory work on it, the relevant materials and other attending circumstances. The dominant tendency of literary scholars in the twentieth century has been to ignore the context of the work until after the reading of the work for impression. The New Criticism had made decisions to move away from the context of the work altogether (Richards, 1929). Although initially complying with this requirement, later authors found the context of the work relevant in a second or third stage in reading (cf.: MacKinnon, Frye, 1963; Widdowson, 1992). Classroom teaching and discussions with student-readers give some evidence in favour of the latter tendency. All interested readers in English as a foreign language agree that access to the context of the work, which makes part of the context of situation, is very helpful to the foreigner. One can consent to the authors referred to above that data of the context of literary work should not precede reading. It cannot be denied either that contextual data are very helpful to foreign readers when, observing the methodological dicta, they are offered at some later stage (cf.: Widdowson, 1992, 62; Drazdauskiene, 1975, 107-113, esp.112-113).

To specify the basic thesis, it has to be added that imaginative literature exercises the power of fulfilling the role of the native environment because it satisfies the conditions of all the contexts involved in verbal communication. The context of situation and its effect have been discussed. Another context that is part of verbal communication is the context of culture. Originally identified as indispensable in understanding⁵ by Bronislaw Malinowski and taken over by Michael

⁴ Contextual descriptions are so impressive in imaginative literature that one is reminded of how the contribution of fiction to research has been acknowledged. A story goes that, on having been complimented how well he had analysed the subconscious, Sigmund Freud was reported to have said: "Thank you, but it had been all done before me by the French novelists". Similarly, contextual descriptions in fiction not only fix the effect of the context on the meaning of the text but imprint it with colourful impressions on the mind of the reader. The fictitious contexts all taken together present an infinite and inexhaustible realm of views and images, of human characters, relations and events in exquisitely wrought states. Routine takes its name from the contrast with the unpredictable and intricate fictitious world.

⁵ Observing fishermen's talk on the islands of the Pacific as a linguist and anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski "saw that in any adequate description, it was necessary to provide information not only about what was happening at the time

A. Halliday (Halliday, Hasan, 1990, 6-7), the context of culture is the total cultural and temporal background in which the communication event unfolds. Any student in languages and literature knows how often his resort to the dictionary extends beyond the simple contextual meaning of the words over to more extensive sources of information providing descriptive data of customs, events, practices, beliefs and other phenomena related to names, facts or characters in fiction and reality. This is the information that makes the context of culture. Even if it is traced on the outskirts of the broadest context, it conceals very intricate knowledge and is related to the idiom of language, which is also indispensable in understanding.

The context of culture has yet another measurement in imaginative literature. Representation in literature is based on a reflection of the cultural background of fictitious reality in the most delicate details. Reaction to such details makes literary experience sensitive and sophisticated. What is more, is that the context of culture has an identity in fiction. As everyone knows, *The Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy represents the cultural scene of the British middle class "in full plumage" in the nineteenth century. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway represents the cultural scene of rural Spain in the civil war, while *The Peppercorn Moth* by Margaret Drabble represents the cultural scene of modern Britain which encircles family relations and a personage's interest in her descent. Cultural identity in imaginative literature is a matter committing the author. The author is not free to destroy cultural identity beyond recognition if he is interested in winning readers. The condition of understanding demands from the author to preserve the image of the culture that he represents shared with the reader. And so merely by this definition, imaginative literature embodies a reflection of the represented culture in intricate patterns. This means that fiction can refine and polish one's cultural understanding. It provides even fragments of the cognitive knowledge of culture, although this is not provided complete and cannot be consumed as a whole (cf. Drazdauskiene, 2002). Any observable and influential image of culture can be gleaned from imaginative literature only in permanent and continuous reading. The polish and cultural knowledge that literature gives come a long way and take a long time. It is an exquisite and expensive gain. Absorbing culture from literature in dedicated reading is an investment like studies in the humanities in general (cf.: Widdowson, 1992). Cognitive knowledge gleaned from imaginative literature can be only an intermediate resource (cf.: Widdowson, 1992, Miller, 2002).

Finally, imaginative literature provides a third context which is known as co-text and is "the relevant textual environment at any point" (Halliday, 1978, 133). It is text itself as a context and it is indispensable in foreign language learning. It is thanks to the co-text and the context of situation that we can use imaginative literature as a very effective resource for the contextual learning of the vocabulary. This is an old and tested practice. All through the twentieth century, different authors kept reminding the teachers in EFL that only contextual learning of the vocabulary is effective, to make this a pedagogical truth (cf.: Dolch, 1927; Politzer and Politzer, 1972). Imaginative literature is a happy resource with respect to vocabulary learning because of the involvement it offers, the contexts it provides, because of how it arrests and exploits the memory and imagination of the learner. While all learning is a social process, imaginative literature provides fulfillment in it.

Since it effectuates the realization of all the three contexts (co-text, the context of situation and the context of culture), imaginative literature has the power to exercise emotive and intellectual influence socioculturally defined in addition to its aesthetic fulfillment. This is most effective on the student who is alert and attentive in reading. The potential of literature opens up in full to those students who are inclined to exploit it. The student can profit through the emotive-intellectual engagement in reading for pleasure, through the intellectual engagement in the discussion of literature and through the educational training and intellectual engagement in

but also about the total cultural background, because involved in any kind of linguistic interaction, in any kind of conversational exchange, were not only the immediate sights and sounds surrounding the event but also the whole cultural history behind the participants, and behind the kind of practices that they were engaged in, determining their significance for the culture, whether practical or ritual. All these played a part in the interpretation of the meaning" (Halliday, Hasan, 1990, 6).

analysing literary works and writing about them. All these aspects of practice have been the known and tested ways in learning language through literature in Europe and the USA (cf.: MacKinnon and Frye, 1963; Monfries, 1974; Widdowson, 1975; Povey, 1984).

My second thesis takes up with the known practices and emphasizes the basic. Not to reiterate the known and the obvious, I intend to mention only one point and this is the role of content. Although one may agree with Bruce Pattison (Pattison, 1963) that “language can be taught, literature cannot”, few will deny its uses in foreign language learning beyond those that have been mentioned here. To support the teachers who sense that the Internet has taken the lion’s share of their students’ attention and time, it may be reminded that the experienced and influential authors have regretted “the unfortunate distinction of language and literature”⁶ and the ignorance of “contemporary critical students of form and style in literature” (Quirk, 1974, 71). This point of ignorance of form and style should remind the modern teacher of languages and literature that young students have indeed strange habits in reading. First, they miss the emotional involvement without which any analysis can be only a superficial pretence. Second, they cannot concentrate, which is partly the influence of the Internet⁷. Third, they miss the point of engagement with literature at all. The third point is worth considering.

It is a curious development that in the age when school has been raised to the level of the analysis of literature, its reading should lose the focus. It must have been exactly for the popularisation of analysis that reading has deteriorated. The task was put before the loading and the result was deplorable. The influence of modern art is also obvious in this state of reading. Modern art neglected content, and the reader/the beholder thought it was not to be marveled at all. Finally, the teachers have experienced self-deception in thinking that it was trivial and unworthy to tamper with content in class. But it is not. Content matters in literature and it should be exploited in class whatever the ultimate pursuit of the educators.

First, disregarding the basic information in text, there is nothing to proceed with in literature and its narrative loses sense. Second, if one misses or ignores the basic key words, one loses the train of thought and continuity of the text. This is the testimony of my recent research and it can be confirmed in reading Shakespeare, the press and in listening in to the radio. No context can help when the basic verbal clues are missing. It must have been this kind of difficulty that Michael Halliday was trying to point out when he wrote of how the extra-linguistic identity of the thing was immaterial to texture. But he emphasised further on that identity chains in contextual configurations were important even when there were situations in which identity chains were accidental. He noted an important point in this: reference to a specific individual may not be important in an identity chain but identity chains appeared “to be closely related to the overall structural shape of a text” (Halliday, Hasan, 1990, 85). Therefore, one can continue, the classifying names in identity chains become essential. There can be no understanding without them. This is of immediate relevance to the understanding of the basic information in the content of imaginative literature.

Third, it is a misconception to believe that content is irrelevant in analysis. On the contrary, analysis resorts heavily to it. Even such distinguished analysts as Roland Barthes found that some light engagement with the content was a necessary beginning in any analysis: “Text analysis should not begin without the primary semantic treatment of the content from the point of view of its topical, symbolic or ideological significance” (Bartas, 1991, 273)

Different authors happened to emphasise the substance of content in different works. Geoffrey N. Leech, for example, made this point in his study of the language of poetry, of meaning

⁶ “... there has been perpetuated a dichotomy between the relatively modern writings that can be ‘appreciated’ (these are called ‘literature’) and the relatively early writings that cannot (and these are called ‘language’). The distinction is unfortunate, and so is the way it is designated. It seeks, ..., to degrade medieval writings...; and it has the additionally unfortunate side-effect (...) of degrading ‘language’ by equating it with what is alleged to be quaint, archaic, or dull. Self-evident as the absurdity is, it seems well-nigh impossible to eradicate the belief that language ceased when Chaucer started to use it” (Quirk, 1974, 65).

⁷ Cf. “While reading on the screen you satisfy your curiosity. It’s a question whether the children pursue the information on the web. Computers have made us relatively lazy even in spelling. It (the Internet – MLD) doesn’t challenge our mind and knowledge.” (*The Forum* // BBC World Service, 16 June 2008)

and significance, in particular. He first drew the student's attention to the weight of information in imaginative literature while using the term 'information' in the communication engineer's terms⁸ and showing its difference from routine communication. This author further specified his view of the question while confirming the potential presence of cognitive meaning in poetry⁹. The concrete pictorial meaning of the words in poetry and the necessity to study it as well as the cognitive aspect of meaning in literature had been similarly brought out by Professor John F. Povey in the USA (Povey, 1984). The emphasis on the relativity of representation in literature by Professors of literature may mislead an inattentive student when he reads that "literature is dissociated from an immediate social context and its meaning has to be self-contained" (Widdowson, 1975, 69), but this may be a handicap only to a superficial reader. What Professor Widdowson says here does not contradict what Professor Leech was quoted to have said above. Professor Widdowson makes a point to the theoretical concept of literary representation and this in no sense contradicts the fact that words in literature retain an aspect of their cognitive meaning. In his other work (Widdowson, 1992), Professor Widdowson spared no time and space to show how the meaning of words and grammar in poetry should be learned even by the young reader. There is definitely no contradiction in the views of the authors referred to as there should be no fear for the EFL teachers to favour the content of literature with attention in class.

In studies of foreign languages and literature, the engagement with literature is continuous and deep. Words and structures can be learned on initial reading while studying the content. This is successful even with beginning students who progress while accumulating the ideas of selected authors and teachers. The immersion effect of literature is best achieved, though, when students read comfortably books that are not too difficult rather than study the vocabulary. Discussions of literature merit attention with students of all age groups who progress while they discuss what they had read with zeal and emotional involvement. The analytical engagement with literature should best be reserved for advanced students who progress through intellectual involvement. Advanced students engaged with literature have a chance to read and think, understand and appreciate and to express it in standard literary language. This work engages intellect over emotions and offers unique conditions for verbal and intellectual development. This development does not take place when students write hurriedly and hand in unedited papers. But the students develop their language and intellect **if** they reconsider their errors and engage in a discussion over their own statements with their fellow students and the teacher.

However, one has to be cautious with the principal conclusion: literature is an expensive and long-time commitment if it is to bequeath intellectual brilliance, sophistication, refinement and polish. It would not be appropriate in the modern world to assert the absolute salvation and profit that derives from literature in the classroom. To be true to fact, this conclusion has to be made with reserve. Literature is an irreplaceable art, a form of emotive-intellectual engagement, a source of pleasure and an infinite resource in foreign language teaching. As Professor Widdowson has assessed, literature in school is an investment but it can be conducive even to citizenship. This resource has to be handled with care to increase rather than to diminish its appeal to and influence on young students. The present conditions in the classroom and in the

⁸ Cf.: "In ordinary pedestrian communications (for instance, in routine business letters), this predictability (i.e. the communicative weight of each linguistic choice – MLD) is high, and the amount of 'information' transmitted is comparatively small. In serious prose, on the other hand, the selections made have on the average a low predictability, and the amount of 'information' conveyed is fairly large. We can confirm this, impressionistically, by noting that a single glance at a business letter is often enough to tell a reader the substance of its message, whereas a page of literary prose has to be read with careful scrutiny: it conveys too much 'information' to take in on a superficial reading" (Leech, 1969, 29).

⁹ Cf.: "In poetry, ..., ...cognitive meaning may seem to be only a small part of the entire communication. Yet it would be quite absurd to insist that cognitive meaning counts for nothing in poetry. Whilst we can reasonably assert that the word *cloud* in Wordsworth's 'I wonder'd lonely as a cloud' conveys something additional to what it would convey in a weather forecast, there is no need to go to the extreme of claiming that the meteorologist's and poet's uses of the terms have nothing in common. If all words were deprived of cognitive content in poetry, they would be reduced, in communicative power, to the level of exclamations like *alas*, *ouch*, and *tally-ho*." (Leech, 1969, 40).

world, though, are very unfavourable to profit from literature to advantage. The custom of reading is not yet dead. Many authors believe that “nothing will ever replace the book” (Michael Chabon, *A Lecture on books and reading*. – Vilnius: the American Center, 7 June 2000). But one has to acknowledge that reading with full emotive-intellectual satisfaction, reading for enjoyment and pleasure are not what philological reading, study and analysis mean. Philological reading is an exceptional kind of reading which takes long hours and scrutiny of the text, but it pays and should not be tampered with irresponsibly. (Young schoolchildren should not be scared with it, for instance.) Again, the reading which creates an aura and culture for the reader is an engagement of a life time. It must be the attachment that never wavers and one’s liking of high fidelity. Literature doubtlessly can create a world and culture for the reader, but this means a long, expensive and dedicated way of life. The present state of the world and of the minds of the people, unfortunately, do not foster attachment to literature, language and the humanities. Short cuts and quick business replace literary studies. Traditional beliefs go, and, with them, part of our humanity may be going. If this does not happen, there is nothing like literature to facilitate the achievement of the chief aim in humanistic studies, which is “to understand, to explain and to appreciate”.

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How Literature Fulfils the Function of the Native Environment (Abstract)

With electronic communication having altered the new generations' concepts of culture, reading and learning, it becomes exigent to redefine the basic concepts of classical education, one of which is the potential of imaginative literature. The problem which focuses the article is the deteriorated culture of reading. The idea of the potential of literature to fulfil the function of the native environment is grounded while analysing how literature realises all contexts (the context of situation, the co-text and the context of culture) active in communication and contributing to understanding. The concrete uses of literature in foreign language learning are only reviewed, while the content of literary works and the cognitive content of the language of literature receive some emphasis. The article appreciates the tradition of the Department of English Philology, Vilnius University, in teaching English as a foreign language through literature.

Kaip literatūra atlieka gimtojo konteksto funkciją (Santrauka)

Sąlygos, kuriose elektroninė komunikacija pakeitė naujų kartų sampratas apie kultūrą, skaitymą ir mokslą, reikalauja iš naujo apibrėžti klasikinio išsilavinimo sąvokas, tokias kaip grožinės literatūros potencialas, kuriomis niekas neabejojo per amžius. Straipsnio akstinas ir problema – skaitymo kultūros degradavimas. Mintis apie tai, kad grožinės literatūros galimybės leidžia jai atlikti gimtojo konteksto funkciją, yra pagrindžiama analizuojant, kaip literatūroje realizuojami visi trys supratimą komunikacijoje įgalinantys kontekstai (situacijos kontekstas, co-tekstas ir kultūros kontekstas). Konkretūs literatūros pritaikymai užsienio kalbos studijose tik apžvelgiami, o literatūros kūrinį turiniui ir pažintiniam literatūros kalbos turiniui paskiriamas ypatingas dėmesys. Straipsnis pripažįsta ir pagerbia Vilniaus Universiteto Anglų filologijos katedros tradiciją remtis literatūra anglų kalbos kaip užsienio kalbos studijose.

28 October 2008

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