

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VISUAL MATERIALS VERSUS CLASSICAL LITERATURE IN ESL TEACHING

*English Language Teaching Research*

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the ongoing debate in English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy regarding the comparative effectiveness of visual materials — including YouTube videos, films, and multimedia content — versus classical literary texts. The central inquiry examines how literary language deviates from ordinary language and what pedagogical implications this distinction carries.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on historical developments in language teaching methodology, survey data from over one hundred ESL students, and current research in applied linguistics, this study argues that while visual materials offer immediate engagement and communicative fluency, classical literature provides irreplaceable benefits for academic vocabulary acquisition, critical thinking, and cultural literacy. A balanced, integrated approach is recommended for long-term academic success.

**Keywords:** literature, linguistic benefits, critical thinking, moral and ethical concerns, literary language, classical text, cultural understanding, ESL pedagogy, visual materials.

## **1. Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> Widdowson, H. G. (1975). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*. Longman. p. 3, line 12: “Our main task in the classroom is to pinpoint how far literary language deviates from ordinary language.”

The question of which instructional medium best serves English language learners has occupied educators, linguists, and curriculum designers for well over a century. Today, as digital technology continues to reshape classroom practice, this question has acquired renewed urgency. Should ESL instructors prioritize the rich, layered language of classical literature — the prose of Dickens, the verse of Milton, the drama of Shakespeare — or should they embrace the immediacy and authenticity of visual materials such as YouTube videos, documentary films, and social media content?

The answer is neither simple nor absolute. To understand the current landscape, it is essential to trace the historical evolution of language teaching methodology, evaluate the empirical evidence concerning both approaches, and consider the specific academic and communicative goals that ESL instruction is expected to serve. Our central task is to determine how far literary language deviates from ordinary language, and what pedagogical consequences that deviation entails for learners at various proficiency levels.

## **2. Historical Overview of Literature in Language Teaching**

### **2.1 The Grammar-Translation Era (Early–Mid 1800s)**

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, literature occupied an uncontested central position in language education. Students were expected to read classical literary texts — Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens — and the pedagogical focus rested firmly on translation, vocabulary memorization, grammar rule analysis, and the close examination of sentence structures. Language learning was understood primarily as an intellectual exercise, a discipline of the mind comparable to the study of Latin or Greek.

Literature was considered the purest and most prestigious form of language, and mastery of its conventions signaled genuine education. However, this approach carried a significant limitation: little or no attention was devoted to spoken communication, listening comprehension, or practical real-world language use. The result was a generation of learners who could parse a Shakespearean sonnet yet struggled to hold a basic conversation in English.

## **2.2 The Decline of Literature (Early–Mid 20th Century)**

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a significant decline in the pedagogical use of literature. Scholars and educators began to argue that the structural complexity and stylistically unique language of canonical texts rendered them unsuitable for most language learners, particularly those seeking practical communicative competence. Literature, it was increasingly argued, reflected an idealized or archaic form of English rather than the living language of everyday interaction.

This opposition persisted for roughly four decades, setting the stage for methodological experimentation that would eventually produce both the audio-lingual method and, later, Communicative Language Teaching.

## **2.3 The Audio-Lingual Method (1940s–1960s)**

Rooted in behaviorism and structural linguistics, the audio-lingual method emerged as the dominant pedagogical paradigm of the mid-twentieth century. Emphasizing drill, repetition, and habit formation, this approach drew heavily on audio recordings and, later, visual materials, rather than literary texts. The primacy of spoken language over written form effectively displaced literature from the mainstream ESL classroom.

The legacy of the audio-lingual method is clearly discernible in contemporary teaching practice, where many instructors continue to rely heavily on audio and visual materials — recordings, video clips, multimedia presentations — as the primary vehicles of language instruction. This reliance, while pedagogically defensible in many respects, has contributed to the progressive marginalization of literary texts in ESL curricula.

## **2.4 The Reintegration of Literature (1970s–1980s)**

The rise of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1970s and 1980s created conditions for a partial rehabilitation of literature in language education. Scholars recognized that literary texts, when carefully selected and skillfully taught, could serve as rich sources of authentic language input, cultural knowledge, and communicative context. By the early twenty-first century, literature had been reintegrated into many ESL programs

as one resource among many, designed to complement the four core language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Nevertheless, the reintegration proved fragile. In the years immediately following, literature once again began to lose ground in ESL classrooms, displaced by the expanding availability and accessibility of digital visual media — a trajectory that echoes, with striking precision, the decline that occurred a century earlier.

### **3. Current Trends: The Dominance of Visual Materials**

Contemporary ESL pedagogy is increasingly shaped by the availability and appeal of visual and multimedia resources. Platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and various educational video services have made it possible for learners to access authentic English-language content at virtually no cost and at any time. Teachers, responding to learner preferences and institutional pressures, have incorporated these materials extensively into their curricula.

To assess learner attitudes toward these competing approaches, a questionnaire was administered to over one hundred ESL students. Participants were asked the following question: "In learning English, which of the following do you think is beneficial for academic long-term success, and would you recommend it to others: (1) videos, or (2) classical literature works?" The results were revealing: sixty-seven percent of respondents selected videos as the more beneficial option, while only thirty-three percent favored classical literature.

These findings reflect a broader cultural and pedagogical shift toward immediacy, visual engagement, and conversational language. However, they also raise important questions about what ESL students understand "long-term academic success" to mean, and whether their expressed preferences align with empirically demonstrated learning outcomes.

## **4. Comparative Analysis: Benefits and Limitations**

### **4.1 Linguistic Benefits of Visual Materials**

Visual materials offer several well-documented pedagogical advantages. They expose learners to natural, colloquial speech patterns, contemporary slang, and the prosodic features of authentic spoken English — elements that are largely absent from written literary texts. The combination of visual context and verbal language facilitates comprehension, particularly for learners at lower proficiency levels, and reduces the cognitive load associated with processing unfamiliar linguistic input.

Moreover, video content can serve as a powerful motivational tool. Learners who engage with material they find entertaining or personally relevant are more likely to sustain their attention and invest effort in the language learning process. The accessibility and diversity of video platforms means that instructors can select content tailored to specific learner interests, cultural backgrounds, and proficiency levels.

### **4.2 Linguistic Benefits of Classical Literature**

The linguistic benefits of classical literary texts are distinct but no less significant. Literary language is characterized by precision, density, and structural complexity that challenges learners to expand their syntactic and lexical range. Exposure to the formal registers and elaborate sentence constructions of literary prose develops the kind of academic language proficiency that is essential for success in higher education — a competency that conversational video content rarely cultivates.

Furthermore, classical texts offer learners an unparalleled opportunity for cultural and historical understanding. The works of Shakespeare, Austen, or Twain encode centuries of Anglophone cultural values, social conventions, and historical experience. For ESL learners seeking genuine intercultural competence rather than surface-level communicative fluency, engagement with these texts provides an intellectual and cultural depth that visual media typically cannot match.

Literary analysis also promotes critical thinking skills of enduring academic value. The practice of interpreting ambiguous language, evaluating narrative perspectives, and constructing evidence-based arguments — all central to literary study — transfers directly to the analytical writing and reading tasks that define academic success at university level.

### **4.3 Literary Language versus Ordinary Language**

A central theoretical question underlying this debate concerns the degree to which literary language deviates from ordinary language. Stylistically, literary texts exploit a far wider range of syntactic structures, employ figurative language systematically, and invest lexical choices with connotative weight that everyday communication rarely demands. This deviation is simultaneously a source of difficulty and a source of pedagogical value.

The difficulty lies in the cognitive demands that literary language places on learners who have not yet consolidated a command of the standard language. The pedagogical value, however, lies in precisely the same source: the challenge of literary language stretches learners beyond their comfort zones, forces them to engage with linguistic ambiguity, and develops the metalinguistic awareness that supports language acquisition at advanced levels. As such, literary texts are most productively used with intermediate to advanced learners for whom the gap between literary and ordinary language is navigable rather than prohibitive.

## **5. Moral and Ethical Considerations**

The selection of instructional materials in ESL classrooms carries moral and ethical implications that extend beyond questions of linguistic effectiveness. Classical literary texts, while linguistically rich, sometimes reflect the social attitudes, prejudices, and ideological assumptions of their historical periods — attitudes toward race, gender, class, and empire that contemporary educators must handle with sensitivity and critical awareness.

Similarly, the uncritical consumption of visual media presents its own ethical risks. Digital content is not ideologically neutral: it encodes particular worldviews, aesthetic

preferences, and commercial interests. Educators who incorporate video materials into their classrooms without critical framing risk exposing learners to culturally hegemonic content that may undermine rather than support the development of independent critical thinking.

Both literary texts and visual materials, therefore, require thoughtful pedagogical mediation. The teacher's role is not merely to transmit content but to help learners develop the critical literacy skills necessary to engage with any text — written or visual — in a reflective and analytically informed manner.

## **6. Recommendations for an Integrated Approach**

The evidence reviewed in this article does not support an either-or conclusion. Rather, it points toward the pedagogical value of a carefully designed integrated approach that exploits the distinctive strengths of both visual materials and classical literary texts.

For beginner and elementary learners, visual materials offer the most effective entry point into the English language, providing authentic input, comprehensible context, and strong motivational support. As learners progress to intermediate levels, carefully selected short literary texts — excerpts, short stories, adapted novels — can be introduced alongside video content to begin developing the formal register and analytical skills that academic success requires.

At advanced levels, classical literary texts should occupy a prominent and sustained place in the curriculum, supported by video materials that provide cultural and contextual background. The goal at this stage is not merely communicative fluency but the development of the academic literacy, critical reasoning, and cultural understanding that constitute genuine long-term language competence.

## **7. Conclusion**

The debate between visual materials and classical literature in ESL teaching is, at its core, a debate about what language education is ultimately for. If the goal is rapid communicative competence and conversational fluency, visual materials offer significant

advantages. If the goal is deep academic literacy, critical thinking, and enduring cultural understanding, classical literature remains an indispensable resource.

The survey data presented in this article — showing that sixty-seven percent of ESL students favor video content for long-term academic success — reflects genuine learner preferences that educators cannot ignore. However, preference is not always the same as benefit. The task of the informed ESL instructor is to build bridges between what learners find engaging and what the research demonstrates to be effective, fostering an appreciation for both the immediacy of visual media and the irreplaceable intellectual depth of the literary tradition.

In sum, the most effective ESL pedagogy is neither nostalgic nor purely contemporary. It is adaptive, evidence-informed, and committed to the full development of learners as both communicators and thinkers.

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