This book is about using literature – defined in this book as plays, poetry or novels or texts adapted as screenplays in film or television – in the second language classroom. There have been a number of publications in favour of using literature for language learning since the 1980s (e.g. Brumfit and Carter 1986; Duff and Maley 1990; Carter and McRae 1996; Chan 1999; Hall 2005; Paran 2006; Teranishi, Saito and Wales 2015). There have also been a number of activities and materials developed for using various forms of literature in the second language classroom (e.g. Maley and Moulding 1985; Collie and Slater 1987; McRae and Vethamani 1999). It has been argued that literature can develop language awareness (e.g. Brumfit and Carter 1986; Jones and Carter 2011), help students to develop the ‘fifth skill’ of thinking in the second language (McRae 1991) and help to develop competences from the Common European Framework of References for Language (CEFR) (Jones and Carter 2011), which are used to measure proficiency in a number of second languages (Council of Europe 2001).

Alongside such theoretical arguments, there have been a small number of studies that have produced evidence which suggest that literature can be beneficial in improving communicative competence, language awareness and language acquisition. Gilmore (2011), for example, found that authentic materials in general can be more beneficial than textbooks in developing several key aspects of communicative competence among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners when tested using a variety of quantitative measures. Although Gilmore’s study was not focused on literature exclusively but authentic materials in general, we can certainly argue that, as a form of authentic material, literature may be similarly beneficial, if selected carefully. Lao and Krashen (2000) is one of many studies which present clear evidence that using literature in the form of graded readers for extensive reading has demonstrable benefits in terms of vocabulary acquisition and reading speed when compared with control groups that do not undertake extensive reading. Lin (2010) demonstrates how the use of Shakespeare’s texts can develop language awareness in Taiwanese EFL learners, when using pre- and post-test measures in addition to qualitative data in the form of learner diaries. Other studies have sought to investigate the
effect of specific types of instruction, from an experimental, learner or teacher perspective. Yang (2002), for example, found a student-centred approach to literature to be more effective than a teacher-centred one, when measured on a pre- and post-test. Schmidt (2004) also found that German learners of English were more positive about the use of Shakespeare in their English lessons when teachers employed a more learner-centred approach. Surveys show that learners can have reservations about the importance of literature when learning a second language (e.g. Martin and Laurie 1993) but that they can also see real value in it for learning language (e.g. Bloemert et al. 2019). Teachers themselves can also express reservations about the benefits of using literature and can demonstrate a lack of awareness of different options available to them in terms of methodology (Paran 2008). This sometimes results in approaches whereby teachers resort to teaching literature as a subject rather than as an aspect of second language learning, which we believe it can be.

Despite the evidence mentioned in the studies reviewed above, Paran (2008) and Fogal (2015) note that in general there is still a lack of empirical research which investigates the effectiveness of literature for second language learning in general (see Teranishi et al. 2015 for a recent exception to this). Of the studies that do exist, even fewer have sought to investigate the effectiveness of literature either as a tool for developing awareness of spoken language or as a tool for developing speaking skills. Although at first glance it may seem odd to discuss literature in terms of its relation to spoken language and speaking skills, we wish to argue that this is a gap in the research. We do so for several connected reasons. Firstly, as mentioned previously, it is often claimed that many second language learning courses are closely linked to the CEFR. The CEFR contains expected competences at each level, and many of these are connected to literature. One such example is ‘I can understand contemporary literary prose’ (Council of Europe 2001: 5) from the B2 self-assessment grid reading descriptor. In order to show such understanding, learners are likely to need to be able to talk about literature and, to at least some degree, understand the representations of spoken language within it. Therefore, we can argue that there is a clear value in research which informs teachers about how they might use literature to work on CEFR competences such as the one mentioned.

Secondly, conversation is a major part of the daily language use undertaken by people (Thornbury and Slade 2006), and in addition, the development of speaking skills and awareness of spoken language are often of primary importance to learners of English as a second or foreign language (Meddings and Thornbury 2009). However, it can be challenging for teachers to access recordings of unscripted conversations to analyse or discuss in class and, unedited, they may not always make interesting or engaging texts for language learning (Cook 1998). Therefore, it has long been suggested (e.g. McCarthy and Carter 1995; Carter and McRae 1996; Carter 1998) that dialogues from literature
could provide interesting and useful models of spoken English that can also be used to develop speaking skills. This is because learners who are engaged with literary texts already have an interest in what characters are saying and in discussing the themes and ideas writers express as they interact with each other. Once engaged, there are also opportunities to encourage learners to notice features of the conversations within these texts. There is evidence that motivation (in this case via engaging texts), noticing and interaction are all important factors in language acquisition (Schmidt 1990; Long 1996; Dörnyei 2012).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that conversations in literature are not, of course, identical to unscripted conversation. Literature, by its nature, aims to create an illusion of reality, and the purpose of literary dialogues are not the same as the transactional and social functions of conversations in the real world. However, it is also true that conversations in literature contain many features we find in the spoken language used by real speakers, and this, combined with their potential to provoke discussion as engaging texts, makes them useful as classroom material.

Despite such arguments, as noted previously, little research exists which provides evidence to support or refute them. Teachers may therefore understand such arguments in theory but wonder if they work in practice. Research can help to provide such an evidence base and either support or refute such theoretical positions. This volume seeks to address these gaps in the research by presenting a collection of studies focused upon the ways in which literature can enhance awareness of spoken language and develop speaking skills. We have sought to produce evidence from studies which take a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach to data analysis and which have been undertaken in a range of English as a second or foreign language settings. This is in order to make the data more robust and also to allow readers to find studies which are linked to a context with which they are familiar. All chapters are linked by a common question: how can literature enhance awareness of spoken language or develop speaking skills?

The studies in Part I of the book explore literature as a vehicle for developing awareness of spoken language. In this section, Byrne and Jones examine dialogues from a literature corpus in comparison with a spoken corpus in order to understand the extent to which literary dialogues offer a plausible and useful model of conversation. Tomlinson then examines how literature can be used as part of a text-driven approach in order to develop an awareness of pragmatic uses of spoken language. He does so by asking teachers in a range of contexts to evaluate materials taking this approach. Jones and Cleary examine the effects on input enhancement when using televised literature (Sherlock) to develop students’ awareness of common features of spoken language. Iida continues the work from Chapter 2 on corpora but instead focuses on students’
composed haiku poems and the features of spoken language they contain. Iida argues that haiku can play an important role in enhancing awareness of spoken language. For the last chapter in this section, Zhao and Liu report on a classroom-based action research study which employed screenplays. They use such materials to test the extent to which such films can develop awareness of pragmatic features of spoken English.

Part II explores the use of literature as a means of developing speaking skills. McIlroy examines the effects of discussing poetry at different levels of familiarity with learners in Japan. Her results show the potential which poetry can have as an aid to discussion and development of conversation strategies in class. Shelton-Strong analyses group discussion from literature circles, whereby learners discuss texts they have read. His research shows the potential for such group discussions to contain many language learning opportunities. Finally, Fogal and Pinner examine the language-related episodes produced by students to measure changes in lexical complexity on the speech of learners as they discussed literature.

While we recognise that many activities could involve both raising awareness of spoken language and developing speaking skills, the division of chapters into these parts will be one that many teachers and researchers recognise and that allows readers to find chapters which most relate to their interests quickly and easily. Explicit links are made between the chapters within each section and between different sections so that readers can see how each relates to the central theme. For example, the skill of noticing can be developed by analysing spoken language in literary dialogues (Chapter 4) and via discussion of literary texts (Chapter 9). Following all chapters, conclusions and implications are given for both teaching and research.

We hope that taken together, the studies will provide evidence which can inform teachers as they make choices in the classroom as well as furthering the research in this area.

References


