

# Synergistic relationship between language and literature in an ESL classroom

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Literature and language are two sides of the same coin. Literature is rooted in language and language gets life through literature. Literature helps in teaching and learning English as a second language. Language skills can be developed through the study of literature; language can be learnt through literature. But the reality is that, in schools and colleges, literature and language are taught as two different subjects. This paper explores the relationship between language and literature, and how they are interconnected.*

**Keywords:** *Language and literature; Language through literature.*

English language plays a dominant role in the field of education. Success in education and careers depends to a large extent on the level of competence of learners in the English language. A threatening factor for effective acquisition of English language is the method of teaching English literature, which separates it from the language.

Literature is a vehicle for students to practise their grammar and vocabulary. It gives authentic examples of sentence structure and language use. In the mid-1900s, the focus of language teaching started to change. Educators became more concerned with developing students' ability to communicate. Educators recognized the potential of literature for meaningful communication. Discussions, role plays and group projects dominated the language learning scene.

The term 'literature' is used in two different senses. It is used to refer to any written material on a subject. Secondly, it is a term that refers to a school or university discipline. Scholars define literature in different ways. Literature is any imaginative and beautiful creation in words whether oral or written, says Onuekwusi (2013). McRae, in his book 'Literature with a Small l' (1991: vii), defines literature as "any text whose imaginative content will stimulate reaction and response in the receiver." It provides entertainment, information, education and excitement to its audience. But at the same time not all literature is imaginative. Some literary works are semi-factual.

Literature is language in practice. Language theories, concepts and styles are put into function in the creation of a literary text. As a discipline, literature has some

functions to perform. Students derive more benefits from literature. The utilities of literature are educational, cultural, oral, recreational and socio-political. Literature helps the learners to develop fluency. Many libertarians support the inclusion of literature in language classrooms since it will help in language enrichment.

Lazar (1993) provides five reasons for using literature in ELT:

- Motivating materials
- Encouraging language acquisition
- Expanding students' language awareness
- Developing students' interpretive abilities
- Educating the whole person

Literature is an important aid for cultural assimilation, emotional stability, liberal education and for developing a mature personality.

Literature and language are not only intertwined but also interrelated. Only with the instrument of language, literature is concretized. It sounds absurd to study literature without language. Literature is rooted in language and language gets life through literature. So, literature and language are closely interconnected. Teachers must use literature to motivate students for language acquisition. "Each novel, short story or play can spark off a wealth of different activities. Tasks and exercises based on a literary text can provide valuable practice in listening, speaking or writing, as well as improving reading skills.

Literary works of all kinds are now becoming increasingly available in spoken form on cassettes" (Collie and Slater, 1996:36).

Valdes (2000) asserts that "It is simply accepted that literature is a viable component of second language programs at the appropriate level and that one of the major functions of literature is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written." As there is no dichotomy between a father and son, so are English language and literature integrated.

The study of literature enhances the development of extensive reading skills. There is a correlation between extensive reading and language acquisition. Reading can provide a ready means of the acquisition of vocabulary which in turn helps in effective writing. Reading instruction is most effective when intertwined with writing instruction. Research has found that when children read extensively they become better writers. Reading a variety of genres helps children learn text structures and language that they can then transfer to their own writing. Reading broadens the students' familiarity with language and reading enables students to compare their own experiences with others. Thus, reading has an important place in writing.

Literature is the main vehicle for teaching and learning language. Literature is the proper place where language gets an excellent position. Literary works provide additional material for grammar practice, vocabulary learning and translation (Liaw,

2001). According to Moody, literature is an umbrella term giving information on every business (Moody, 1971:1, cited in Turker 1991: p.299). McKay (1982) argues that "... literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge, both on a usage and use level. Secondly, to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. It may also enhance students' understanding of a foreign culture and perhaps 'spur' their own creation of imaginative works."

Krashan (1984, 1985, 1987) points out that the relationship between reading and writing is like the relationship between a mother and her baby. Good writing is the by-product of vast reading. He maintains that a large amount of self-motivated reading for pleasure would give rise to the desired effect on writing. Reading acts as a stimulant for writing. People read in order to obtain information, develop vocabulary, make inferences, classify, observe, analyze, draw conclusions and make generalizations. Reading literature enhances language acquisition in general and effective writing in particular.

There are many reasons for using literature in the language classroom. Carter and Long's (1991) three models of why teachers use literature in the language classroom are the cultural model, the language model, and the personal growth model. Scott (1964) strongly advocates the use of literature as a cultural way-in. Literature is the product

of historical and social circumstances. Literature is "one of the most obvious and valuable means of attaining cultural insights" (Scott, 1964, p. 490). The focus of the language model is psycholinguistic. Teachers may choose to focus on how language is used within a given text. The benefits of the language model are the expansion of vocabulary, increased reading fluency, and enhanced interpretive and inferential skills. The personal growth model offers a more student-centered approach to literature study. The purpose is to use literature as a vehicle to educate and to promote critical awareness. To reap the full benefits of literature in the language classroom, a combination of all the three models has to be used.

The choice of literary works used in the language classroom determines the success. If the language is too difficult or too culturally distant, the learning gains will be minimum. Teachers must try to engage, entice and enthrall learners by the right texts followed by lively discussions. The text must not be too long since the students will be scared to read a long text. If the teacher shows boredom, the teacher cannot motivate the students. Text selection is a 'crucial factor' (Maley, 2001: 184) in making literature a resource for linguistic development, personal enrichment and cultural appreciation. Ayo (2003, p. 130) opines that "through the creative methods of teaching literature, the students can be helped to develop confidence in themselves in producing coherent and cohesive spoken discourses and in organizing sentences into

paragraphs with effective linkers and organizing paragraphs into coherent and meaningful written discourse.”

Literature is a vehicle for students to practise their grammar and vocabulary. It gives authentic examples of sentence structures and language use. In the mid-1900s, as it was pointed out earlier, the focus of language teaching began to change. Direct method and audio-lingual method dominated the language classrooms. Educators became more concerned with developing students' ability to communicate in real life situations. With the advent of the communicative approach, educators recognized the need for meaningful communication. Discussions, role plays and group projects started to take over the communicative language classroom. In any language, great literature leads to great conversation, and great conversation is the ultimate goal of language learning.

Literature is the artistic expression of language and it cannot exist without language. For cultural enrichment and awareness, literature is to be used in the language classroom. Literature is the reflection of the society. Literature can broaden one's outlook. All human emotions like anger, happiness, sadness, passion, love and hatred are expressed in literature. Maley (1987) enumerates some special virtues for learning English through literature: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, and ambiguity. The themes literature deals with are common to all cultures though their

treatment may be different – Death, Love, Separation, Beliefs, Nature, etc. Literature does not trivialize or talk down about anything. Literature is about things that mattered to the author when he wrote them. It offers genuine as well as authentic inputs.

Teaching literature develops the intellectual, social and moral values of students. Constant exposure to literary texts can foster intuitive awareness in students. If literature and language are taught together they may enhance the level of understanding of the students. Literature can impress and educate the individuals. Choosing the right literary text is important in using literature in language teaching. If the students in the class are interested in sports and games, romantic literature may not attract them. A book about a famous athlete or cricketer may be interesting to such students in the classroom. Chunks of vocabulary are to be taught to the students in advance. That will give confidence to the students to discuss stories in meaningful ways. Discussion questions can be given at the end of each chapter. Instead of the routine question-answer method, students can be allowed to draw a picture or a graphic organizer to express their ideas about the literary text. Literary texts can provide multiple sources of linguistic output. Texts can be supplemented by audio, music, film clips and podcasts, and all these will enhance the sensory input.

Thus, it is clear that there is a relationship between language and literature. An integrated approach of using literature in the language classroom can enhance the

proficiency level of the students. Language learners get the opportunity to develop their linguistic and communicative skills when literature is used in the language classroom in an interesting and motivating way.

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