

Incorporating Literature in ESL Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Literature in language classroom can enhance the critical thinking abilities of the learners. Incorporating literature in language classroom can be motivating and it can provide an interactive climate which can improve the communicative competence of the learners. Literature can be used to teach language through interesting activities such as brainstorming, role-playing, word association, situational scenes and prediction. Literature provides a platform where teachers are able to provide learners pleasure by engaging their affective domain. By strengthening the affective and emotional domains literature develops a sense of involvement for the learners. Literature helps students to understand another culture. The present paper discusses how incorporating literature can develop the language skills of the learners in ESL classroom.

KEYWORDS

Literature; Language; Learning; Learners; Competence.

Literature that was initially read and enjoyed by enthusiasts and elites has gradually paved its way to become a more dynamic resource for teaching English as a second language. Literature in language classroom can enhance the critical thinking abilities of the learners. It can also create a learner-friendly environment. Incorporating literature in language classroom can be lively and motivating and it can provide an interactive climate which can improve the communicative competence of the learners. Literary texts are a rich source of classroom activities and they provide a motivating atmosphere for learners. Literature cultivates the critical abilities of the students. It encompasses every human dilemma, conflict and yearning unravelling the plot of a short story or decoding the dialogue of a play and is more than a mechanical exercise.

According to Langer (1997:607) literature can open “horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect and explore”. Literature in language class can make it vibrant and enthusiastic.

Many educators and researchers in both L1 and L2 have recognized the various benefits that language learners can gain from the integration of literature. Lazar (1993:15-19) provides five reasons for using literature in ELT –

- i. motivating materials
- ii. encouraging language acquisition
- iii. expanding students’ language awareness
- iv. developing students’ interpretative abilities
- v. educating the whole person

Collie and Slater (1987: 3-5) mention that literature offers valuable, authentic and

relevant materials that provide cultural and language enrichment, as well as personal involvement for students.

Literature is rooted in a language and language gets life through literature. So Literature and language are closely interconnected. According to Lazar (1993):

Literature should be used with students because it is motivating stimulus for language acquisition, students enjoy it, and it is fun, it is found in many syllabuses and the like.

Literature, a convenient source of content for a course in foreign language, provides motivating materials for language teaching. According to Carter and Long (1991), "Literature is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching."

In the 1980s, literature has made its presence into the language curriculum through the new evolution in Applied Linguistics and Literary Theory in the 1970s. In the area of Applied Linguistics, through experts in stylistics and discourse analysis, a new move has been identified that emphasizes on the need to use learning materials that can present emotionally engaging and intellectually stimulating experience for the language learners (Delanoy,1997).

Brumfit and Carter (1986) asserted that literary texts not only can grip the reader's imagination more strongly but they can also be promoted for the examination of language at work. Littlewood (2005) also observed that although such texts were predominantly valuable for developing reading skills, it could be exploited for purposes such as explaining grammar teaching and indicating various types of language usage.

Literature can be used to teach language through interesting activities such as brainstorming, role-playing, word association, situational scenes and prediction. Literature in language classroom will give opportunities for students to express their opinions about

general subjects. Literature is an important window letting one have a view of the world and realizing the expression of culture by means of sharing individual or collective life experience.

As in any language learning, especially English, the four major skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are a very important aspect in which all learners of the language must grasp, before mastering the language. Literature, therefore, provides a platform where teachers are able to first provide learners pleasure by engaging their emotions (Hill, 1989:9). When using literature in the language classroom, skills should never be taught in isolation but in an integrated way. Teachers should try to teach basic language skills as an integral part of oral and written language use, as part of the means for creating both referential and interactional meaning, not merely as an aspect of the oral and written production of words, phrases and sentences.

English literature, in schools and colleges, includes selected works of English writers such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, Charles Dickens, and a host of many others. Reading the texts of these writers is considered an important part of English culture as well as literary development. It can be especially valuable in generating intellectual growth, aesthetic appreciation, and an understanding of how experiences of people in the past and present can be represented (Cox, 1991; West, 1994). By strengthening the affective and emotional domains of students, literature develops a sense of involvement in them (Carter and Long, 1991; Collie and Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993). Course-books do not provide for any emotional and reflective engagement with the target language.

Krashen (1993) mentions the difference between acquiring and learning language. While learning is consciously undertaken, acquiring is subconsciously done. Reading literature encourages

learners to adopt the language subconsciously because it doesn't focus on forms intentionally. In case of nursery rhymes and children literature, predictable and repetitive patterns allow children to feel and link the language to their own lives (Ghosn, 1997). As the authentic material, literature imparts the diverse forms and functions of written language (Hadaway, et.al., 2002). Without having to memorize it, skilful readers will be aware that telling a story requires the use of past tense and writing a letter follows certain formats and conventions. Literature presents the registered language for different contexts.

Literature helps students to understand another culture. Reading Shakespeare will give students an idea of how people lived at certain period of time in England. When students read Harry Potter series they get a glimpse of the government system in English since the stories involve some incidents where the main characters need to contact the government. Choosing the suitable materials plays an important role in using literature in ELT setting. Familiar international fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* and *The Little Red Riding Hood*, provide good samples to start since most children know the story. As children learn by imitating, it is then a progress when they are able to use the narrative structure in retelling the same story. Literary texts in English reflect a wide range of cultural diversity of our world. The wisdom of a culture is transmitted through its language and literature. Literature gives awareness and insight to students by encouraging them to read the texts written by different writers. Literature stretches their imagination, deepens their experience and heightens their awareness.

Though the world of a novel, play, or short story is an imaginary one yet it presents a setting in which characters from many social backgrounds are described. A reader can discover the way the characters in such literary works see the world

outside i.e. their thoughts, feelings, customs, traditions, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave in different settings. This world in a literary text can help the second/foreign language learner to feel for the codes and preoccupations that shape a real society through visual literacy.

Duff and Maley (2007) stress that teachers can cope with many of the challenges/difficulties of teaching language through literature if they ask a series of questions to assess the suitability of texts for any given group of learners:

- a) Is the subject matter interesting to the group?
- b) Is the language level appropriate?
- c) Is the text right lengthwise for the time available?
- d) Does the understanding of the text require exhaustive cultural or literary background?
- e) Is it religiously or culturally offensive in any way?
- f) Can it be easily exploited for language learning program?

Once the teachers find answers to the above questions they can proceed with the task of using the text for teaching language. Appropriate selection of literary texts would undoubtedly lead to better results.

Through a piece of literary work, a learner can learn vocabulary, discover question answers, evaluate evidence individually and learn grammatical aspects. The focus of teaching literature is to make the students comprehend the meaning, which the author tries to express. Students will keenly feel this effect if teachers enjoy the texts they are teaching. Literature deals with the topics, which are fundamentally interesting, as they are about human experience and are designed to engage the readers' attention.

Literary texts provide aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure. Because of its symbolic density literature provides much impetus for language learning. Literature provides ample

opportunities to develop students' interpretative power and it can familiarize students with many features of the written language. Study of literature is not merely concerned with skill acquisition. It serves to foster a comprehensive outlook on life. Literary texts help students to become more mature, liberal and responsible citizen. It's encouragement for sympathy and tolerance, its plea for open-mindedness is an admirable aim that learners readily embrace.

Valdes (1986:137) claims that it is simply accepted as given 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. When we use literature in the language classroom, we are teaching the language.

Literature is a high point of language usage, arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of the language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language (Basnett and Grundy, 1993).

According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. In addition to these four main reasons, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the second language classroom context.

When selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account needs, motivation, interests, cultural background

and language level of the students. One major factor to take into account is whether a particular work can arouse the learners' interest and can elicit strong, positive reactions. Reading a literary text can have a long-term and valuable effect upon the learners' linguistic knowledge when it is meaningful and amusing. Choosing books relevant to the real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner is of great importance.

Poetry can pave the way for the learning and teaching of basic language skills. It is a metaphor that is the most prominent connection between learning and poetry. Because most poetry consciously or unconsciously makes use of metaphor as one of its primary methods, poetry offers a significant learning process. There are at least two learning benefits that can be derived from studying poetry:

- The appreciation of the writer's composition process, which students gain by studying poems by components
- Developing sensitivity to words and discoveries that may later grow into a deeper interest and greater analytical ability

Saraç (2003:17-20) also explains the educational benefits of poetry as follows:

- provides readers with a different view towards language use by going beyond the known usages and rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary,
- triggers unmotivated readers owing to being so open to explorations and different interpretations,
- evokes feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind,
- makes students familiar with figures of speech (i.e. simile, metaphor, irony, personification, imagery, etc.) due to their being a part of daily language use.

Short fiction is a supreme resource for observing not only language but life

itself. In short fiction, characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives and do so in a variety of registers and tones. The world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives (Sage 1987:43). Using drama in a language classroom is a good resource for language teaching. It is through the use of drama that learners become familiar with grammatical structures in contexts and also learn about how to use the language to express, control and inform. The use of drama raises the students' awareness towards the target language and culture. The use of a novel is a beneficial technique for mastering not only linguistic system

but also life in relation to the target language. In the novel, characters reflect what people really perform in daily lives. Novels not only portray but also enlighten human lives.

The teacher has an important role in teaching English through literature. The teacher should select the literary texts relevant to the aim and the objectives of second language teaching. Literature provides students with an incomparably rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers. Language and literature are strongly related. Literature enriches language and it is language that helps to understand literature.

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