

The Role of Literature in EFL Classroom from an EIL Perspective

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Abstract

Quite recently, there has been an accumulated body of beliefs and claims advocating the beneficial role of literature as a legitimate vehicle through which a foreign language can be taught. Though this argument seems to be alluring, it can be problematic and target of much criticism if an English as an International Language (EIL) perspective is adopted. This paper first elaborates on the advantages of employing literature in EFL classroom. Then it furthers to argue that from an EIL perspective the fact that literature is highly culturally loaded, can potentially pose a threat to the cultural integrity of the learners. The final argumentation is that if literature is aimed to be employed for teaching a foreign language, it should not be monocultural literature, but it should be in the form of multicultural and multinational literature, otherwise, becoming too preoccupied with monocultural literature, in this sense, will culminate into more linguistic imperialism, self-marginalization, self-alienation, cultural colonialization and hegemony.

I. Introduction

Since the middle of the 1980s, the role of literature as a legitimate vehicle through which language can be taught has been gaining momentum (Duff & Maley, 1991). After a heated debate among language educators and ELT practitioners on the use of literature as a useful pedagogic instrument to build up linguistic competence, today teaching language through literature is essentially viewed as teaching language through any other written material (Carter, Walker, & Brumfit, 1989). Therefore, any standard activity that is used with non-literary texts, can be used with literature as well, such as rewriting, prediction activities, role-playing and so on (Carter & Walker, 1989). Therefore, nowadays many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern (Sage, 1987, p. 1).

II. Advantages of employing literature in EFL classroom

A couple of scholar and language educators have enumerated a variety of legitimate reasons for the use of literature in ELT. According to Collie and Slater (1990, p. 3), there are four main reasons for the beneficial use of literature in the classroom:

1. Valuable Authentic Material

Literature is inherently authentic and provides authentic input for language learning (Ghosn, 2002; Shrestha, 2008). Most works of literature are not created for the primary purpose of teaching a language. Thus, in a classroom context, learners are exposed to actual language samples of real life /real life like settings. In reading literary texts, because students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers, they become familiar with many different linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings.

2. Cultural Enrichment

Literature is considered as a means to introduce students to certain aspects of the target culture and to increase their understanding of verbal / nonverbal aspects of communication in the country within which that language is spoken. For such learners, literary works, Such as novels, plays, short stories, etc. facilitate understanding how communication takes place in that country. And from a pedagogic point of view, as language and culture are closely linked, the teaching of culture is seen as an integral and organized component of language courses (Chastain 1988, p. 298).

3. Language Enrichment

Literature provides learners with a wide range of lexical, discoursal and syntactic options. They learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their own writing skills. Students also become more productive and adventurous when they begin to perceive the richness and diversity of the language they are trying to learn and begin to make use of some of that potential themselves. Thus, they improve their communicative and cultural competence in the authentic richness, naturalness of the authentic texts.

4. Personal Involvement

Literature can be useful in the language learning process owing to the personal involvement it fosters in the reader. What is mentioned in the literature may be totally natural and related to the life of the reader. This relatedness involves and immerses the reader and makes him/her to become enthusiastic to find out what happens at the end.

Van (2009) believes studying literature in the EFL classroom is advantageous for a number of reasons:

- It provides meaningful contexts;
- It involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose;
- It appeals to imagination and enhances creativity;
- It develops cultural awareness;
- It encourages critical thinking;
- It is in line with CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) principles.

Maley (1989, p. 12) points out some of the reasons for regarding literature as a potent resource in the language classroom as follows:

1. Universality

2. Non-triviality

3. Personal Relevance

4. Variety

5. Interest

6. Economy and Suggestive Power

7. Ambiguity

1. Universality

The themes dealt with in literature are common to all cultures despite the fact they are treated in their different ways - Death, Love, Separation, Belief, Nature ... the list is familiar. These experiences all happen to human beings.

2. Non-triviality

Many of the more familiar forms of language teaching inputs tend to trivialize texts or experience. Literature does not trivialize or talk down. It is about things which mattered to the author when he wrote them. It may offer genuine as well as merely "authentic" inputs.

3. Personal Relevance

Since it deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which either constitute part of the reader's experience or which they can enter into imaginatively, they are able to relate it to their own lives.

4. Variety

Literature includes within it all possible varieties of subject matter. It is, in fact, a battery of topics to use in ELT. Within literature, we can find the language of law and of mountaineering, of medicine and of bull-fighting, of church sermons and nursery talk.

5. Interest

Literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting, because part of the human experience, and treats them in ways designed to engaged the readers' attention.

6. Economy and suggestive power

One of the great strengths of literature is its suggestive power. Even in its simplest forms, it invites us to go beyond what is said to what is implied. Since it suggests many ideas with few words, literature is ideal for generating language discussion. Maximum output can often be derived from minimum input.

7. Ambiguity

As it is highly suggestive and associative, literature speaks subtly different meanings to different people. It is rare for two readers to react identically to any given text. In teaching, this has two advantages. The first advantage is that each learner's interpretation has validity within limits. The second advantage is that an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed since each

person's perception is different. That no two readers will have a completely convergent interpretation establishes the tension that is necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas.

Upon reviewing the related literature, Nasr (2001) comes across with some additional points in favor of literary exploration in EFL/ESL classes:

- It has the potential to consolidate the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- It requires learners to think out and put into practice special reading strategies to deal with the idiosyncratic characteristics of verse and prose.
- It broadens intellectual perspectives, and boosts cognitive maturation.
- It helps learners develop feelings for the language they are learning.

Admittedly, literature has got undeniably beneficial pedagogic uses as far as language teaching is concerned and what mentioned above bears testimony to this seemingly legitimate claim. One of the benefits of literature is the injection of cultural element into ELT and classroom context which was regarded so conducive from a non-critical language teaching point of view(Chastain, 1988).

But the point of argumentation here is that from an English as an International Language(EIL) perspective the fact that literature is highly culturally loaded, can potentially pose a threat to the cultural integrity of the learners. This treacherous issue will be elaborated in following sections.

III. Culture in ELT

The role of culture in English language teaching has been widely recognized and verified by the majority of ELT theoreticians and ELT practitioners. McLeod (1976) some years ago pointed out that, "by teaching a language ... one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly"(p. 2 12). Michael Byram (1991) writes, "The aims of language teaching are to develop both linguistic and cultural competence, which can be called an intercultural communicative competence."Chastain (1988) sees the teaching of culture as "an integral, organized component of the course content" of a language program (p.298) due to the inextricable interconnection of language and culture and the significance of an awareness of and tolerance for intercultural differences.

Kitao (2000) gives reference to several authors lists some of the benefits of teaching culture as follows:

- Studying culture gives students a reason to study the target language as well as rendering the study of L2 meaningful (Stainer, 1971).
- Studying culture gives learners a liking for the native speakers of the target language. Studying culture also plays a useful role in general education; studying culture, we could also learn about the geography, history, etc. of the target culture (Cooke, 1970).
- From the perspective of learners, one of the major problems in language teaching is to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person. Although grammar books give so called genuine examples from real life, without background knowledge, those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In addition, providing

access into cultural aspect of language, learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places (Chastain, 1988).

- Besides these benefits, studying culture gives learners a liking for the native speakers of the target language. Studying culture also plays a useful role in general education; studying culture, we could also learn about the geography, history, etc. of the target culture (Cooke, 1970).

As a result of the unanimity of the overwhelming majority of the language educators on the beneficial role of culture in language teaching, literature can be regarded as an appropriate ground for the genuine exploration of the target culture (Gajdusek, 1988; McKay, 1982).

IV. An EIL Perspective

The fact that English is currently an international language being learned and taught as an additional language often to communicate information about their own cultures in order to participate in a global community challenges the dominant assumption that the cultural content for ELT should be derived from the cultures of native English speakers. From an EIL perspective native speaker is no longer the point of reference as far as the cultural content is concerned.

Smith (1976) posits a couple of assumptions with regard to the relationship of an international language and culture. Among these assumptions are that:

- a) Learners of an international language do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language,
- b) The ownership of an international language becomes “de-nationalized”, and
- c) The educational goal of learning an international language is to enable learners to communicate their ideas and culture to others.

Therefore, the role of culture ELT pedagogy that reflects a native speaker model needs to be reassessed with reference to the teaching of EIL. According to McKay(2003), culture plays a significant role in language pedagogy in at least two ways. First, cultural knowledge often provides the basis for the content and topics that are used in language materials and classroom discussions. Secondly, pragmatic standards are frequently based on particular cultural models. Which culture to use in both these areas of language teaching needs to be carefully considered with reference to EIL perspective.

McKay (2002) argued that using the source culture is a way of empowering the students and making them practice using English to express their own culture and identity. McKay suggested that presenting international cultural materials could demonstrate cross-cultural pragmatics by which the bilingual users of English can demonstrate their own rules of social appropriateness, while they are also learning to understand the appropriateness of other cultures. In the domain of teaching international culture in the classroom, NNS and NS English teachers are on a level field, and both should focus on enhancing international awareness. Therefore, taking EIL as

point of departure, to safeguard the cultural integrity of the non-native speaker, local and indigenized cultural content should be incorporated in ELT pedagogy. As McKay (2003) puts it “In dealing with the linguistic and pedagogical aspect of culture in language teaching, what is needed is a full recognition that English today has become denationalized. Hence, it is local educators who need to determine what linguistic information, cultural content, and teaching methodology are most appropriate for the local context so that learners will be able to use English to tell others about their own culture.”

Now the claim which is made here is that using English literature as a vehicle to teach English language for the pretext of cultural awareness can pose a serious threat to one’s cultural integrity. Becoming too preoccupied with literature, in this sense, will culminate into more linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), self-marginalization, self-alienation, cultural colonialization and hegemony. According to Modiano (2001), a number of cultures have lost a distinct identity originating from an ancestral language as a result of linguistic imperialism. He further adds that even in some people’s opinion, Western European languages such as French and German, are ‘suffering’ from Anglo-Americanization. Nevertheless, the similarity in values, social organization, religious orientation, etc., has made the spread of English less problematic for Europe (p. 343). Yet, as far as the non-European cultures are concerned, the dominance of English language and literature has left dramatic results. The difference in values and outlooks among none-European cultures and the English-speaking countries is a point of divergence that affects the target culture.

Western cultures, as an agent holding the dominant power in the world, have imposed their existence upon non-European countries, labeling them “Others”. The imperialistic traits hidden in Western approach towards the others was also implicitly transferred through their cultural and linguistic occupation of the Other. Along with the upsurge of Marxism in the philosophy and sociology of the twentieth century, thinkers of the Frankfurt School were the first to initiate the debate. Having Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse etc as the heads, the Frankfurt school exercised neo-Marxist ideas in an inter-disciplinary field focusing on the issue of imperialism through non-political means. One of the topics they concentrated upon was linguistic and cultural imperialism. They argued that the western societies have registered their standards by means of their language and culture. The main contribution of the Frankfurt School thinkers to the polemic was the notion of the “consumer”. Their argumentation centered on the idea that the dominant countries have imperialistically sold their language and culture as a “production” to the members of the target language keeping them as pure consumers of a product they think superior to their own. During such process, the consumers feel satisfied and continue to willingly use the culture of the dominant countries. By this means, the implicit indoctrination of the dominant cultural norms is internalized in the collective identity of the target society (Tomlinson, 1991, p, 98). Another charge against linguistic and cultural imperialism was the criticism of the holistic approach of the imperialistic countries. In this process, the self-autonomy of the target culture is severely jeopardized and the outcome borders on a sort of “synchronization of the cultures” which ends to the advantage of the dominant culture (Tomlinson, 1991, p, 110).

“Cultural globalization” is another concept that emerges as a result of an imperialistic approach towards culture. According to Paul Hopper, the cultural event of globalization has close affinities with the social, economical and political aspects of imperialism. It is an inescapable outcome that is given birth by practice of imperialism in linguistic and cultural fields through the course of history. Hopper believes that the globalization of the culture is not merely a modern issue; rather, it dates back to the middle ages and continues to ceaselessly exert its existence up to the present time. Accordingly, links between imperialism and colonialism can be explicitly drawn.

Post-colonialism, as an interdisciplinary post-modern school, investigates the systematic application of language and culture in the importation of imperialistic values. Edward Said, one of the most prominent post-colonial theoreticians, believed in case England and France did not have motivations to expand their empire, the literature of the nineteenth century would not be produced in these two countries. Said considered language and literature as two main forces propelling the imperialistic aims of the western cultures resulting in the oppression of the target language and culture. According to him, the promulgation of economical, social and political institution of imperialism could not happen if the function of culture as a means be overestimated (Said 67). Competition for mastery and domination on the others is a process which is always at work. It can be manifest in different sites of a struggle, but what underlies this game is that a play of domination of values is also surreptitiously at work (Ibid 36). Said believes that the difference between the Roman empire and the modern ones is that the former employed a geographical invasion of a country aimed at extracting resources, while the latter focuses on an exploitation of identity, reinforcing its values in the mind of the target, somehow molding them into a wholly new nation. The case of British colonialism in the nineteenth century demonstrates the notion in that they infused the Indians with their culture and language.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is another post-colonial theoretician who criticizes the invasive process of cultural and linguistic imperialism. She calls imperialism a sort of “terrorism” which aims at destroying the originality of the cultural elements of the target while reducing that to the level of an inferior by through a gradual process (Morton, 2003, p, 20). The term she applies to represent the place of the inferior is “subaltern”. Subaltern connotes the oppressed state of the colonized nations deprived of their innate qualities (Bongie, 1991, p, 30).

The significant point about the latent effect of the cultural and linguistic imperialism is the perennial influence of the dominant culture on the subaltern. Nations have been reported to feel possessed by the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the colonizer. This is an issue that gains momentum especially after the departure of the imperial power. As Gandhi (1998) says, the impact of the cultural imperialism leaves the colonized with a sense of longing for the colonizer. It transforms the system of beliefs in the mind of the target community and injects a sense of “inauthenticity” in their former self-conception (Luk & Lin, 2007, p, 19).

Despite the barrage of criticisms made at the notion of cultural and linguistic imperialism, some commentators have offered different outlooks towards the issue. Critics like Homi Bhabha have argued in favor of a state of “hybridity”. Bhabha combines the discourse of post-colonialism with the ideology of deconstruction, dismantling the notion of “fixed identity” which was stressed upon in the idea of the former critics. Unlike Spivak, he does not see the identity of the target

and the colonizer as two distinct notions; neither does he praise the purity of each. Bhabha's outlook towards the connection of the cultures and languages is more complimentary than derogatory. In a reworking of deconstructive principles with post-colonialism, Bhabha invites both sides to come to a juncture of values. He extols hybridity as a characteristic that best goes with the post-modern notions. By hybridity, he alludes to a state of "in-betweenness", a situation in which no one is the absolute power (Habib, 2005, p. 750). In inaugurating the notion of hybridity, Bhabha takes on a lot from the dialectic philosophy of Georg Fredrich Wilhelm Hegel which was later on adopted by the contemporary Marxist thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of polyphony. Hybridity is equal to synthesis in a dialectical process, where the two sides of the dichotomy leave their stark contrast aside and join each other in a state of harmony. The harmony and unity of the two is the premise upon which Bhabha proposes his idea. Whether the target culture and the imperialist force can come to a reciprocal relationship remains unanswered, but the very possibility can offer positive outlooks towards the future of linguistic and cultural imperialism.

Conclusion

There had been a heated debate among language educators and ELT practitioners on the use of literature as a useful pedagogic instrument to build up linguistic competence, and today teaching language through literature is essentially viewed as a healthy procedure as far as language learning is concerned. However, if literature is aimed to be employed for teaching a foreign language, it should not be monocultural literature, but it should be in the form of multicultural and multinational literature, otherwise, becoming too preoccupied with monocultural literature, in this sense, will culminate into more linguistic imperialism, self-marginalization, self-alienation, cultural colonialization and hegemony.

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