
Literature and Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of ideas and research regarding the role of literature in language classes. Firstly, it provides an explanation of positive and negative views toward utilizing literature as a resource for language teaching. Secondly, it sketches out different methodological issues regarding the use of literature. Finally, some empirical studies carried out to examine the role of literature in language instruction are presented.

Keywords: Literature, EFL/ESL contexts, Language teaching

I. Introduction

The use of literature in language teaching traces back to the nineteenth century. The dominant method of language teaching was grammar translation and the most popular technique was the translation of literary texts in the mother tongue. Literary works provided additional material of grammar practice, vocabulary learning, translation (Liaw, 2001). With the advent of structural approaches to language and popularity of direct and audiolingual method, literature was not utilized in language classes anymore. Even in the time of CLT literature was ignored and discarded from language syllabuses. One of the most influential figures in the field of literature, Maley (2001), mentions the lack of empirical research in support of the facilitative role of literature as the main reason for the negative view.

But from the middle of 1980s the interest in literature as a teaching resource has renewed and continues until today. This can be seen from the publication of textbooks on the role of literature in language classes (e.g Duff & Maley, 1991; Gower & Pearson, 1986; Hill, 1986; Lazar, 1993; Maley & Duff, 1989; McRae, 1991), but there is still controversy over the use of literature for the purpose of teaching and learning language. Many efl/efl teachers consider the literature just as the work of art and beyond the proficiency level of their students and ignore it as a source of learning and teaching (Bassnett & Grundy, 1993). Some teachers use literature as a filler type activity and not as an integral part of their instruction (Wasanasomsithi, 1998). But some scholars believe that literature expands the linguistic knowledge of the learners (Povey, 1967). Pugh (1989) argues that literature is a rich source of meaningful input especially in EFL settings.

But what are the reasons for and against the use of literature in language classrooms?

II. Against the use of literature

McKay (1982) mentions some of the common arguments against utilizing literature. The first one is the lack of contribution of literature to the teaching of grammar which is one of the important goals of language teaching program. The reason for this is the structural complexity and unique use of language in literature. The second argument is that the literature does not help the students to reach their academic and occupational goals. The third one is the specific cultural viewpoints which are reflected in every piece of literature. Grasping and making sense of the cultural perspectives may be difficult for the students especially for EFL or ESL students.

III. For the use of literature

According to Povey (1972) reading literature familiarizes students or learners with subtle vocabulary usage and new and complex syntax and through this contribute to the extension of language usage and linguistic knowledge. Another advantage of using literature in language classes is the promotion of language use or communication especially in EFL settings. McKay (1982) believes that in literary works settings, role relationships are predetermined and social context is taken into consideration, so it can be used for increasing the awareness of the students about language use. The other contributions of literature to learning are the motivational or affective and experiential factors which are provided through literature and their influence on the reading proficiency of the learners. If we conceive reading as the interaction between readers and the text, the reader should be willing and motivated to read and the literature can be considered as a tool for providing the motivation. The improvement of reading proficiency leads to achievement in academic and occupational goals. Another benefit of the literature is the encouragement of tolerance for cultural differences and promotion of creativity in the students.

Maley (2001) points out the reasons for the suitability of literature as resource in EFL and ESL setting. 1. Universality: all known languages have literature and the themes conveyed through them like love, death, separation, nature, etc. are common to all cultures. All over the world literature follows similar literary conventions and genres 2. Non-triviality: unlike many of other language teaching resources trivialise texts or experience, but literature does not trivialise or talk down. It offers genuine and authentic inputs 3. Personal relevance: ideas, events and things expressed in literature are either experienced by learners or can be imagined; therefore, they are able to find relevance between them and their own personal lives 4. Variety: there is a great variety of language and subject matters talked about in literature. Students can enjoy a non-monotonous and versatile selection of literary texts 5. Interest: literature is by nature intrinsically appealing as it deals with familiar subject matters in an attractive and interesting way 6. Economy and suggestive power: one of the distinguishing features of literature is the evocative meaning which words and sentences remind. Literature goes beyond what is said and many ideas can be expressed with few words. 7. Ambiguity: literature allows for different interpretations. It is rare for two readers to have an identical reading of one single text. This diversity of approaches and interpretations creates an opportunity for a genuine exchange of ideas and triggers interaction. Moreover, every learner can feel secure about the validity of his interpretations of a particular text.

Arthur (1968) mentions three ways in which literature can promote language learning. The first one is the large repertoire of vocabulary that is used in literature compared to speech.

The second one is unique syntactic patterns which are only found in written English especially literature. For example the use of passive voice, frequent occurrence of subordinate clauses, subordination within subordination and stylistic order inversion. The third benefit is that the literature aid students to understand the other societies and cultures. The characters acts and events occur according to the norms of a specific culture or society.

Oster (1989) points out two advantages of using literature in ESL and EFL setting. Literature "enlarges students' vision and fosters critical thinking" (85). Literature helps students to see from varied perspective because when they read a piece of literature, they discuss about the events, characters and have different interpretations. The students understand that their classmates have seen things differently and learn how to read in new ways. Oster mentions the benefits of literature to writing skill such as encouraging creativity, learning richer vocabulary and using them in students' writing and learning how to use figurative language to make the writing more affective.

Hadaway, Vardell and Young (2002) propose three advantages of using literature. The first one is the contextualization of language. Learners become familiar with the use of language in different situations when the read a piece of literature. Social and affective factors which are embedded in different formats of literature such as such as picture books, news papers, short stories are another benefit of literature. So Literature can be suitable for students with different styles and takes into account individual differences. The third benefit refers to the natural and meaningful use of language which are accomplished by illustrations and use of descriptive language in literature.

Lazar (1993) says that literature can be used as a tool for creating opportunities for discussion, controversy, and critical thinking.

IV. Methodological issues in using literature in language classes

One of the most important points in using literature in language classes is the concept of literary experience. It is simply defined by Arthur (1968) as the special interaction that exists between the book and the reader. Literary experiences have certain characteristics. The first one is that they happen to the reader. In other words you cannot order someone to enjoy a story or poem. The second one concerns the reader and the text. The piece of literature should be suitable for the reader and the reader himself/herself should be eager and willing to react to the literature. The last characteristic is that the reader should be intellectually and totally involved with the piece of literature he/she is reading. A crucial point which is mentioned by Arthur is that "if literature is to provide a useful vehicle for the teaching of second language skills, it must first succeed as a literary experience.

There are some factors which play crucial role in encourage the students to experience literary experience while reading a piece of literature. The first factor is the choice of literary text. They are some suggestions given by Arthur concerning the choice of the text. Teachers should not select a text which involves many new and difficult vocabulary items and grammatical structures. This will discourage the students because they cannot make sense of the piece of literature especially in EFL settings in which the proficiency level of the students may not be high enough to analyze and make sense of difficult vocabulary and grammatical structures. New and unfamiliar cultural assumptions should also be avoided specially in the

earliest stages of language learning. They are some stories which are common to all countries and cultures. The teachers can select those stories or can translate the popular stories in students' native culture if students have the same L1. But literary value of the story should be kept during the translation process. Another factor which contributes to the literary experience is non-verbal accompaniment embedded in the text. These non-verbal clues include pictures (even for adults), sound effect especially for children and teacher's tone of voice. It is recommended that the literature be first presented to the students as a totally non-verbal experience. The third and last factor mentioned by Arthur is the reading environment. During using literature in an ESL/EFL classroom the atmosphere should be relaxed and non-threatening. The amount of explanation given by the teacher should be minimized. The teachers should avoid taking a reading exam after reading the story because the students will prepare themselves for the exam rather than receive the story as the literary experience.

Maley (1989) has distinguished between two purposes for literature teaching. The first one is the study of literature, and the second one the use of literature as a resource for language learning. Purpose One emphasizes the 'special' status of literature, Purpose Two views literature as one of the many uses of language.

If we are involved in Purpose One, then we can approach literature through two different methods. As Maley (1989) puts it:

- (a) The first approach is the literary critical approach in which our primary concern is the 'literariness' of the text we study. In this traditional approach we concentrate on aspects of the text such as plot, characterisation, setting, point of view, motivation, value, psychology, etc. In order for this approach to be successful, students should both be competent enough in the language, and familiar with the literary conventions. However, disregarding very few exceptions, EFL/ESL students rarely are at the desirable level of competence for this purpose. The result is what is called a "pseudo-competence" in which students memorise technical critical terms without deep understanding and merely repeat the opinions they had been exposed to in exam by rote. Therefore, application of literature in this manner needs a great amount of preparation and work both on students' language and literary competence.
- (b) The second approach is the stylistic approach in which we focus on literature as 'text'. The starting point for this approach is the text itself and then we concentrate on textual discoveries leading to interpretations of the text. Because language is in priority in this approach, it is certainly more relevant to EFL/ESL contexts. Unlike the first approach, linguistic elucidation and description precedes interpretation. (p.10-11)

Maley points out if the second purpose is the focus of attention, literature can be considered as a source of teaching and learning language. We can take advantage of the interesting nature of literature to create motivation in students, and then devise activities suitable to their proficiency level. Our primary concern will be to ensure that students interact with the text and with each other. This interaction will lead to language learning and literary understanding follows as a by-product of their involvement in and engagement with the texts.

V. Studies on the use of literature in language classes

Donato and Brooks (2004) examine a senior-level literature course for Spanish language majors to see if group discussions in this class help students develop advanced level speaking functions. They analyze the discourse of literary discussion in respect to (a) discourse structure of literary discussion, (b) types of questions used by the teacher during discussion, (c) use of verb tenses, and (d) learner uptake by using a qualitative research design. The findings of their study show that discourse structure of literary discussions, in the class they observed, is mostly word and sentence level discourse, and IRE script is observed quite frequently. The dominance of display questions is another significant finding. While discussing their results, Donato and Brooks state that discussions that take place in literature classes have the potential to incorporate advanced proficiency goals however to achieve this goal instructors and students should be aware of and well-prepared for the potential of literary discussions.

Mantero (2001) investigated the nature of classroom talk in a fourth semester, literature based Spanish course. He initially identified three levels of classroom talk namely utterance, dialogue and discussion, and investigated the nature of classroom talk in a literature class. He particularly focused on the instances when classroom talk moves beyond utterance and dialogue level, together with the roles of readings (texts), students and instructor in classroom talk. The findings of his study revealed that the nature of classroom talk in that Spanish course is overwhelmingly at the dialogue level (similar to IR (Initiation-Response) script where the teacher initiates a discussion with a question and the student follows up with a response). Another interesting finding of the study was that the instructor has been in control in most of the classroom talk, letting students only respond to questions asked.

Skidmore (2000) analyzed two examples of classroom discourse between a teacher and a small group of students, which belong to the genre of 'talk about texts', in English primary schools (L1 setting) Similar to Donato and Brooks' (2004) study, Skidmore analyzed one sample from two genres of talk, internally persuasive discourse and authoritative discourse, with respect to (a) the types of questions asked by the teacher, (b) elaboration of learner responses (i.e., uptake) and (c) teacher's facilitation or impediment of the classroom discussion.

VI. Conclusion

Literature is a new material in teaching and learning communicative competence of the language. In the literature-based classroom, literature can be the primary material of teaching the target language, providing authentic and real contexts of communicative situations. It also provides the pleasure of learning a new language with and through interesting stories. Students can extend their knowledge and experience of the world by reading literature. The language teacher should encourage students to read literature for their own meanings and experiences instead of being forced to accept the teacher's perception of the text literature provided examples of effective and appropriate usage of the language for the students to learn. Literature also shows students new ways to view the world around them by constructing meaning from the text.

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