

LITERATURE IN EFL/ESL CLASSROOM: A MULTIFACETED PRACTICE IN ELT

Mr. Gaurav Thakarar

Lecturer,
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Indukaka Ipcowala Institute of Management,
CHARUSAT University, Changa
Anand - Gujarat (India)

Abstract

Teaching of English to non native speakers of English has been a challenge for the teachers as far as methods and techniques are concerned. Teachers have been compelled to find the new and innovative methods and techniques time and again. Understanding the fact and the challenge, the researchers and publishers have started to encourage and find new techniques in the form of literature to eliminate the boredom of monotonous and boring activities that we use in so called “Communicative Language Teaching”.

The researcher will try to emphasize the use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). In recent years, the role of literature as a basic element and source of authentic texts of the language curriculum rather than an ultimate aim of English instruction has been gaining momentum. Among language educators, there has been a continuous debate as to how, when, where, and why literature should be incorporated in ESL / EFL curriculum. Vital discussion of how literature and ESL / EFL instruction can work together and interact for the benefit of students and teachers has lead to the emergence of interesting ideas, learning, and improved instruction for all.

In the nutshell, the researcher would aim to discuss why a language teacher should use literary texts in the language classroom, what sort of literature language teachers should use with language learners, literature and the teaching of language skills, and benefits of different genres of literature to language teaching will be taken into account.

Thus, the place of literature as a tool in teaching English as a second or foreign language will be unearthed.

Introduction:

English Language has become an indispensable pre-requisite almost all levels of educational system and therefore, it is introduced to students from the pre-primary to the tertiary level. English language has become a major criterion for admission into tertiary institutions and a compulsory subject that must be taken and taught in the University since the recent past. Learning and comprehension of any language involves proper understanding of the people’s culture, which can be effectively and clearly facilitated through literature about the people. Learning of foreign language like English is therefore, impossible without a proper understanding of the study about the people. Thus, this article contains an overview of the

problems of teaching methodology of English language, relationship between language and literature, benefits of using literature to teach English language.

The problems faced in Teaching Foreign Languages forced the teachers to find out and develop some new methods and techniques. The so called "Communicative Language Teaching", which is very popular these days, gives credit to the use of the "authentic language" as it is used in a real life context whenever possible. The conventional Teaching-learning methods which are widely used in especially audio-lingual methods make the process of teaching monotonous; and these boring activities direct the students and consequently the teachers to look for new tools, methods and materials, other than the textbook, to make the learning entertaining and interesting. Realizing this fact, the publishers have been trying to encourage and to eliminate this boredom by presenting simplified literary passages since 1950s. As seen using literary texts in language teaching is a new innovation, but teaching a foreign language only by using literary passages cannot, of course, be so useful.

If we go on to define "Literature" from the Language Teaching point of view, we come across a very important definition.

According to Alexander Baird,

"Literature is the use of language effectively in suitable conditions"

(Baird, 1969; 203).

As he mentions, literary texts can be used in English Language Teaching because the language used in literary text is suitable for the contexts of the events and communication.

The use of language is the most important one among the functions of literature. Foreign language teachers have been adopting the method in accordance with the students' level and their syllabus since last decade or so.

Changing Roles of Literature in ELT

Even the descriptions offered so far of uses for literary texts for language development work; for contrastive cultural analysis; etc. may seem removed from established traditions of English literature teaching, which typically emphasizes on the historical circumstances of the given text, its reception in that era, its implication today and the assessment of established critical views.

The established standards of literary study may appear timeless but it exists in contemporary use of literary texts in second-language situations in recent years. It is appropriate here to relate current methodological thinking to the history of uses of literary texts in second-language learning. This history can be divided into three conceptual phases:

1. Conventional approach

There has been a longstanding tradition of English teaching that basic language instruction in the structures of the language somehow leads on to the study of literature. Studying literature is taken, in this view, as somehow higher and more sophisticated than studying language. Once a student has acquired language structures, she/he is ready to go on to short stories and selected lyrical poems, followed later by a much broader range of literary texts. This idea, which fits comfortably with structural syllabuses in language teaching, is till now set in the many institutions.

2. Practical approach

In the 1960s and 1970s, notions of communicative language-teaching gradually emerged as a more fully worked-out and institutionally confident set of procedures as the hierarchical view of

language and literature was challenged by ideas developing in functional syllabus planning. Often these syllabuses excluded the use literary texts as a tool for teaching English Language with the belief that while literary texts may have value of various sorts but relatively they have least functional application.

3. Discourse / stylistics approach

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a marked reaction against strong versions of the functional view as regards use of literature occurred, drawing its ideas especially from work in discourse stylistics. These approaches suggested that, even having a need for communicative language teaching, it remains important as ever to study a wide range of texts. The only condition for the utility of these works is that they should be used in innovative and appropriate ways, especially ways which involve comparing and contrasting different stylistic properties and conceptions of value.

Interactive Methodologies

The arguments outlined above suggest a current usefulness for literary texts in the sort of L2 situations, subject to those texts being taught in innovative and appropriate ways. However, the contemporary sense of 'interactive' literature teaching is, in this context, less the traditional virtue of lengthy personal discussions about reading than structured group activity on interpretation. This type of work links together communicative language-teaching approaches with exploration of the specific questions literary texts raise: of intended audiences and foreseen effects; of the particular values works investigate or propose; of their relationship to other texts, and their ways of representing (or neglecting to represent) social groups, forces and issues.

Language / Classroom Activities When Using Texts

- Warm-up activity
- Listening and Comprehension tasks
- Study skills and dictionary work
- Silent reading
- Discussion in the target language
- Expression of personal response
- Stylistic analysis
- Written response and creative writing

Methodological issues in employing 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:

1. The first one is its effect on the reader. In other words you cannot order someone to enjoy a story or poem.
2. 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.
3. 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.

Using Different Genres of Literature in Language Teaching Poetry

Teaching language through poetry can prove quite effective for the teaching and learning of basic language skills. And it is metaphor that is the most prominent connection between learning and poetry. And 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:

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

Moreover, it also

- makes the students acquainted with the prosodic features of the target language, such as stress, pitch, juncture, intonation
- provides a different perspective towards the use of language 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,
- makes students familiar with figures of speech due to their being a part of daily language use. Example of simile, metaphor, irony, personification, imagery, etc.
- gives an enjoyable experience with the properties of rhyming and rhythm both of which convey "*love and appreciation for the sound and power of language.*"

Novel

Teaching language through literature a novel is a beneficial technique for mastering not only linguistic system but also life in relation to the target language. Novels not only portray but also enlighten human lives. Using novel in a foreign language class offers the following benefits:

- develops the advanced level readers' knowledge about different cultures and different groups of people,
- offers real life / real life like settings,
- gives students the opportunity to make use of their creativity,
- improves critical thinking skills,
- paves the way for teaching the target language culture,
- enables students to go beyond what is written and dive into what is meant.

And when selecting a novel to be used in the foreign language class, the language teacher should pay attention to whether the novel has an intriguing story that will be of interest to the entire class. Novel should have a powerful, fast-paced plot and interesting, well delineated, memorable characters. The content of the novel should be suitable to students' cognitive and emotional levels. When assessing comprehension, teachers may employ novel tests requiring students to develop the sub-skills of written language like spelling, handwriting, grammar, and punctuation. Essay type tests written by teachers help students to gradually improve their skills in writing and organizing material into paragraphs with acceptable sentence structure.

Thus, if selected carefully, using a novel makes the students' reading lesson and it also proves to be quite motivating, interesting and entertaining. Though many students find reading a novel written in a target language difficult, boring, unmotivating, novel is a very effective way of building vocabulary and developing reading comprehension skills. And it is through reading that students broaden their horizons, become familiar with other cultures, and hence develop their intercultural communicative competence, learning how to view the world from different perspectives.

Short Stories

Teaching language through Short Stories has been a supreme resource for observing not only language but life itself as characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives in a variety of registers and tones. The inclusion of short fiction in the ESL / EFL curriculum offers the following benefits:

- makes the students' reading task easier due to being simple and short when compared with the other literary genres,
- enlarges the advanced level readers' worldviews about different cultures and different groups of people,
- provides more creative, encrypt, challenging texts that require personal exploration supported with prior knowledge for advanced level readers,
- motivates learners to read due to being an authentic material,
- offers a world of wonders and a world of mystery and promotes critical thinking skills,
- facilitates teaching a foreign culture (i.e. serves as a valuable instrument in attaining cultural knowledge of the selected community),
- helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings,
- acts as a perfect vehicle to help students understand the positions of themselves as well as the others by transferring these gained knowledge to their own world.

Thus, the use of a short story seems to be a very helpful technique in today's foreign language classes. And it makes the students' reading task and the teacher's coverage easier.

Drama

Teaching language through literature a drama in a language classroom is a good resource for language teaching because 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 benefits of drama in language teaching are:

- stimulates the imagination and promotes creative thinking, critical thinking skills,
- promotes language development,
- heightens effective listening skills, strengthens comprehension and learning retention by involving the senses as an integral part of the learning process,
- increases empathy and awareness of others, fosters peer respect and group cooperation,
- reinforces positive self-concept,
- Provides teachers with a fresh perspective on teaching.
- bringing authenticity into the classroom,
- exposing the learners to the target culture as well as the social problems a society may be undergoing,

- increasing creativity, originality, sensitivity, fluency, flexibility, emotional stability, cooperation, and examination of moral attitudes, while developing Communication skills and appreciation of literature,

Thus, the use of drama is an effective technique in communication-based, student-centered foreign language teaching in 21st century as it is an authentic material it helps students to promote their comprehension of the verbal / nonverbal aspects of the target language they are trying to master.

There are some factors which play crucial role for the encouragement of the students to experience literary experience while reading a piece of literature.

- The first factor is the choice of literary text. As per 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 provided that literary value of the story should be kept intact.
- Another factor which contributes to the literary experience is non-verbal accompaniment rooted in the text. These non-verbal clues include pictures, 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*. The first purpose emphasizes the *special status of literature*. The second purpose views literature as one of the many uses of language. If we are involved in the first purpose, then we can approach literature through two different methods.

As Maley (1989) puts it:

- 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, characterization, 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 memorize 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, a great amount of preparation and work is needed on students' language and literary competence.

- 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 is more important than interpretation.

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.

The following criteria for using literature in language teaching should be taken into consideration:

1. The texts should be chosen carefully, because it should not be forgotten that in these texts there may be grammatical, linguistic, and literary difficulties.
2. Literary texts should include the structure and vocabulary previously learned. In that there should not be difficult and ambiguous structures.
3. You should deal with linguistic and grammatical sides as well and avoid making the lesson as if the author teaches.

Conclusion

For many students literature can prove to be a key to motivate them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. The successes, of course, in using literature greatly depend on the selection of texts which will not be difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level. The use of literary texts, from language teaching point of view will be useful because these texts show how language works in various contexts. Moreover, they show how language should be used; in which conditions and situations. The students also understand principles by practicing them and develop a critical attitude towards cultural habits.

The use of literary texts in language teaching can be summarized as follows:

1. Literary texts will help not only to improve reading but listening, speaking and writing skills as well.
2. It is possible to understand and get general information related with experiences and events in real life by using and analyzing literary texts.
3. Literary texts will help to realize the individual and societal developments. They make the readers to improve themselves culturally and educationally in accordance with their emotional features. They also remove mother tongue interferences.
4. Literary texts make the students acquire analyzing and criticizing skills

To use literary texts in language teaching is, of course, very difficult but it cannot be overlooked that to make use of easy and understandable literary passages will make the teaching business easy, effective, and retainable and beneficial.

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