

Enhancing Students' Linguistic Competence and Cultural Awareness Through Literature

تعزيز الكفاءة اللغوية للطلاب والوعي الثقافي من خلال الأدب

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Abstract

Language studies or linguistics is a science that tackles language from the perspective of structure, form, meaning and context, while literature is the art of the written composition, expressed through poetry, prose and theatre. Language, Literature and Cultural Studies aims at enabling the student to build a deep understanding of a culture based on the language and literature of that culture. Language and literature are both a very powerful expression tools and they offer insight into the building elements of a culture, the particular characteristics of a society or social group in terms of spirituality, intellect, emotion and physical environment. These forms of expression are some of the strongest transmission channels of the cultural heritage of a society and researching those helps understand the drivers and mechanisms of the culture in question. The purpose of this paper is to familiarize foreign language instructors with the effectiveness of using literature as a mean of bridging the cultural gap between students and the target language. It will also discuss how teaching literature can help students become more effective communicators in the target language and at the same time making them appreciate other cultures different from their own.

Key words: Foreign culture, Language, Literature, Students.

ملخص

الدراسات اللغوية أو اللسانيات هي علم يتناول اللغة من منظور البنية، الشكل، المعنى والسياق، بينما الأدب هو فن التعبير الكتابي، المعبر عنه من خلال الشعر والنثر والمسرح. تهدف كل من اللغة والأدب والدراسات الثقافية إلى تمكين الطالب من بناء فهم عميق للثقافة بناء على لغة تلك الثقافة وأدبها. تعد اللغة والأدب من أقوى أدوات التعبير، فهي تعطي نظرة متفحصة لعناصر بناء الثقافة، والخصائص المميزة لمجتمع ما أو مجموعة اجتماعية من حيث الروح، الفكر، العاطفة والبيئة. تعتبر هذه الأشكال من التعبير بعض من أقوى قنوات نقل التراث الثقافي للمجتمع والبحث عن تلك القنوات يساعد على فهم الدوافع وآليات الثقافة. الهدف من هذا المقال هو تقديم تعريف أكاديمي للغة الأجنبية بفعالية استخدام الأدب كوسيلة لسد الفجوة الثقافية بين الطلاب واللغة المستهدفة. سيناقش المقال أيضا دور الأدب في مساعدة الطلاب في أن يصبحوا أكثر فاعلية في اللغة المستهدفة وفي نفس الوقت جعلهم يقدرون ثقافات أخرى مختلفة عن ثقافتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة الأجنبية، اللغة، الأدب، الطلاب.

1. Introduction

One of the major functions of teaching literature in a foreign language classroom is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the target language of the people who speak the language in which it is written. Therefore, literary texts can offer to the students a colorful world that reflects the culture of the language community. As readers; students get engaged within these texts, they come to understand how the characters in such literary works experience life and how they speak and behave in different settings. However, the study of literature can be considered as a method in which students can dive into the cultural experience of the language throughout the imagery and metaphors mentioned in a given text. Arries (1994) points out; that Students learn to see a world through another's eye, observing human values, different kind of living and discovering that others' lives are different societies, they will understand and become broadly aware of the social, political, historical, cultural events happening in a given society.

2. The Role of Literature in Language Teaching

Literature, when defined as a subject of study, is an activity that involves and uses language O'Sullivan (1991). Bessmertnyi (1994) stated that it is also referred to as the big "L" that focuses on the literariness of a text. It is an example of language in use and a context for language use. Literature is seen as a medium in which students' appreciation of different system language organization can be developed. Therefore, studying literature, on the whole, may not be considered as a reaction but rather as an interaction between the reader, the writer and their cultures. It was believed that to "learn a second language successfully, one has only to get the linguistic competence in that language". In other words, when someone has a good listening and pronunciation, a sound knowledge of vocabulary together with a good mastery over meaning of sentences and structures, he has the linguistic competence. (Brown 2007: 247)

From another parameter, the teaching of literature in a foreign language classrooms is essential and can be used as a perfect instrument to stimulate and speed up the teaching and learning processes. (Carter and Long 1991). Hence, literature contributes in helping the students to explore knowledge, promote their literacy development and fosters their language proficiency. Also, literature may provide effective, attitudinal and experiential factors which will motivate students to read. As a matter of fact, literature has much to offer than language would normally do, since it has greater freedom and since it acknowledges no linguistic barriers which could refrain our ability to use language. Indeed, it is undeniable that literature helps to improve students' command of language and the ability to use it freely, not solely as a linguistic, but as a cultural, intellectual, social and psychological medium of expression. (Hismanoglu 2008).

In terms of using literature to teach language, 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. Since literary texts contain language intended for native speakers, literature stands as a model for language learners to become familiar with different forms and conventions. Containing real examples of grammatical structures and vocabulary items, the literary texts raise learners' awareness of the range of the target language and advance their competence in all language skills. However, using literature in language teaching has the advantage of providing cultural information about the target language. Literary texts increase foreign language learners' insight into the country and the people whose language is being learnt which fosters learners' ability to interpret discourse in different social and cultural target language contexts (Collie and Slater, 1991).

3. Literature as an Instruments that Stimulates the Knowledge of the Culture

Teaching literature stimulates the imagination of the students and develops their critical abilities by getting them involved in interpreting the different symbols and meanings found in the text. They become more productive and adventurous when they perceive the richness and diversity of the language. Therefore, it is vital if educators create a harmonious literary atmosphere where they may enable their students to immerse themselves in the story by turning the classroom into a cultural island where students interact with the text, share different viewpoints about the settings, the style and the language. Therefore, using literature can be beneficial to language development because since it enhances the knowledge of culture and society which is too complicated to be captured by any single piece of expository writing. It also fosters critical thinking by offering readers multiple perspectives especially in books with issues such as immigration, cultural differences, social upheavals... (Edmondson 1995:6).

However, literature captures the complexities of the human situation, illustrating (dramatically, imaginatively, compellingly) the grounds and the meanings of values, and the nuances of our

experiences. It also allows us imaginatively to inhabit the lives, the experiences, the meanings of others. Literature challenges the sensitive values, and those distortions of values which serve the ends of the powerful, the opportunistic, and those who want only to serve their own desires. From an other parameter, literature explores and reflects conflicts in the culture itself, conflicts in the values and ideas of the culture, the conflict of social groups (ethnic, racial, class, gender, religious and so forth), in addition to that, it offers a sense of identity and community, by establishing and founding narratives which capture the 'essence' of what typifies the culture or community, or by dramatizing those particular stories and images which give the culture a sense of common meaning and purpose. Abulhaija (1987).

4. Multicultural Literature for Students' Cultural Enrichment

Literature is a window that enable students to be engaged in a varied and rich cultures. It focuses on the realities of various cultures (Bista, 2006; Lindgren 1991; Rochman 1993). Indeed the multicultural literature describes how people live in different parts of the world, it gives the students the opportunity to meet them and learn about their culture, it also offers students the chance to see themselves and diverse cultures in literature, engages them in a way that allows them to become world citizens. By giving them access to stories and voices not heard in the classroom, students are given the opportunity to deeply question their own worldview. Besides, multicultural literature not only enriches students experiences in the classroom but may also provide ample opportunities for a rich conversation on books, cultures, and life in general.

5. Literature Discussion Groups as a Mean that Fosters Students' Cultural Accessibility to Literature Classroom

As a literature teacher who develops a great love of reading, I tried and I'm still trying to share this love with my students, literature discussion groups is one of the strategies that I often use in my literature classes. The aim of using this techniques is to wake up those who never read books and make them meet different cultures and interact with their classmates. Since books serve to transport us towards different horizons, literature journeys can stimulate students' wonder and increase their cultural awareness towards different people, cultures, and ways of life around the world that could look alike or different from their owns. In order to create a harmonious literary atmosphere that could enable my students to immerse themselves in the story by turning the classroom into a cultural island where they can interact with the text, share different viewpoints about the settings, the style, the language...

With first year master students, I have selected novels that tackled contemporary issues such as: *friendship* and the *gentleman caller*. The purpose behind such selection was to allow students to take an active role in the story by turning their literature classes into a community where students can engage themselves actively within the culture and the language they are studying and where the emphasis in class would be on their cultural awareness.

The novel that dealt with the issue of friendship was entitled "*The Waves*" written by the modern British writer; Virginia Woolf. It tells the story of six friends (six boys and six girls) from childhood till ageing, the novel is divided into seven (7) sections. In each session we analyze, discuss and criticize a section. *Friendship* was among the prominent themes and the debatable topics that we tackled on in Woolf's novel we even compare it with the value of friendship in Algeria. We travelled with the characters throughout their different stages of life. Indeed, knowing about the characters relationship gives the students the opportunity to speak about their experiences with their friends and how the concept of friendship is portrayed in both cultures; British and Algerian.

With the issue of the Gentleman Caller, the students had the opportunity to study an American play entitled *The Glass Menagerie* written by one of the great American playwrights, Tennessee Williams. The story is about the mother Amanda who regularly nags on her son Tom to find a

husband for her crippled daughter who is becoming older and no one comes to get married with her. We discussed in several sessions the different situations and themes related to the play, and also about the dream of the American mother which is to find a caller to her daughter and we compared her to the Algerian mothers. Discussions led us create a comparative analysis about the two different cultures (American and Algerian) as far as the obsession of the gentleman caller is concerned. The debate was harmonious since students start to share their opinions about the callers and the *Algerian Dowry* nowadays, they even performed the play in both American and Algerian contexts.

I introduced to them another novel that speaks about nearly the same topic and written by the Mexican writer Laura Esquivel (1950). "*Like Water for Chocolate*". The novel tells the story of two sisters, their mother and the gentleman caller. The youngest daughter Tita falls in love with a handsome man called Pedro who comes to the family's ranch to ask for Tita's hand in marriage. Because Tita is the youngest daughter it is forbidden by a family tradition, upheld by her mother, Mama Elena, to marry before Tita's oldest sister, Rosaura.

Students were asked to read the story and in a literature discussion group session they have to give their opinions and make a comparative study about the three cultures (Algerian, American and Mexican) and then describe how far social and cultural issues can be common. The purpose of integrating literature discussion groups is to enable students to have a meaningful conversation about the book. Literature discussion groups reveals their thoughts and ideas and encourages them to understand different cultures and ideologies in relation to their own.

6. The Benefits of Meeting a Foreign Culture Through Literature

Literature has mostly been regarded as one of the pedagogical disciplines in teaching a foreign language and as a site for exchange between cultures. However the study of both foreign and home cultures can act as a vehicle for the enhancement of language abilities and personal identities. Therefore, it is possible to say that literature can be considered as a fundamental teaching / learning tool to expose students to the different aspects of cultural learning; it can be used to discuss culture with students. This may lead us to say that literature becomes a window to understand the nuances of a living culture within a given society. Besides, cultural learning becomes a process through which the learners of a foreign language and literature incorporate and readjust their values, perceptions, and practices in a redefined internally persuasive discourse.

Other Benefits for Students

- a) **More Authentic Language Learning.** Culture teaching has many benefits for language students. It allows students to "feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language". The language learning experience becomes more real, more purposeful and more authentic for learners when they are taught the cultural contexts of the language itself (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).
- b) **Motivates Students to Learn Languages.** Teaching about the target culture when teaching the target language piques the interest of students and acts as a motivator, it reinforces this view by promoting the use of what she calls *cultural-awareness: oral activities* which she says will serve to motivate students. (Parkinson 2000).
- c) In literature social and **cultural texts** can help students to effectively participate and comprehend the subject matter.
- d) **Literature builds experience**, while readers expand their horizons through vicarious experiences. They visit new places, gain new experiences, and meet new people.

7. The Literature Teacher as an Intercultural Mediator

As teachers, we don't heal our students, but we do nourish them. Works of literature not only they take us to the author's imagination, but they also trigger powerful memories, rouse our conscience,

and possibly or hopefully ignite fires that lead to further expressions that resonate with those of greater society ; our cultures, religions, politics, and economies .In teaching language and culture to students there are several strategies of which teachers may avail. Teachers are urged to present cultural facts in a manner which does not value the target culture over that of the students' native culture (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Kristmanson (2008) echoes these views by noting that language teachers have the daunting task of creating a positive atmosphere and attitude towards the target language and culture, while at the same time in no way compromising the integrity and importance of the first language or culture of the language students. Clark (2014) states that, *"teachers must possess the skills necessary to validate the culture of their students and help them develop a positive sense of self"* (p.7).

The teacher is often the only language model that students encounter in their language study in school. For this reason, the language teacher has a significant and central role to play in helping students to acquire both a linguistic and cultural competences in a L2 or FL. The teacher is not only expected to be knowledgeable about the language conventions he or she is teaching; the language teacher is also responsible Culture Teaching for understanding and imparting knowledge to students about the target culture associated with the target language, and any variations in culture which may exist.

When it comes to learning a new language there can be no substitute for actually living in a country where this language is spoken. Besides, teaching literature does not mean ,limit students to take a passive role but to stimulate students to be engaged proactively within the target language. Learning a foreign language is a kind of discovery process , It becomes even more apparent when the student is an adult. It works as if he/she were a child taking his first steps into a new language. Thus, the teacher figures as an important character in this journey, for it is his task to make the learning process interesting. However, foreign language teachers can provide literary texts best by turning their literature classes into a community where students can engage themselves actively with the culture and the language they are studying and where the emphasis in class could be on 'cultural experience rather than cultural awareness. As Duff and Maley (1997) point out, *"literature offers universal themes which are relevant to students' own experience, it is also a mirror that reflects and heightens each learner's perception of the social world"*. Thus, literary texts are opened to multiple interpretations and interactions". Students cannot remain passive if they are to interpret and understand what they are reading. They are placed in an active interactional role in working with and making sense of the target language guided by the teacher, they have to actively participate and interact with each other.

The author and psychologist Robert Coles (1929) who still teaches classes like "Literature and Medicine" at Harvard, argues that: " we read and engage fiction in order to do moral , social history and culture". As a young psychiatrist, Coles listened to his patients as they recalled their experiences to him. In this way, he began to see his patients as storytellers.

He began to see his patients as "texts" full of signs and wonders that he must learn to "read" if he was ever going to connect with his patients in efforts to heal them. In this case , we can say that teachers are supposed to offer to students the opportunity to enjoy the world of literature and the development of interest in reading literature. As teachers, we don't heal our students, but we do nourish them.

8-Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the relationship between language culture and literature and to explain why one cannot be taught without the other. A look at the why, when and how to teach culture questions were central to the focus of this paper. Literature and culture in foreign language teaching can provide linguistic and artistic elements and perspectives to students . Through literature as well as culture, students could have the opportunity to establish a connection

with the target language and realize that their own personal, social, cultural and historical contexts have been influenced by a foreign language and a foreign culture and how, in a symbiotic process, this other culture has been nourished. Culture, on the other hand, offers an interdisciplinary field that includes artistic discourses, social conventions, and reflexive impacts. It opens the door for students to increase their knowledge of the target culture as they can contemplate and critically comment on people's way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and regard how these elements can have an impact in linguistic categories and forms. Indeed, language found a soulmate in literature, and they are inserted in culture. Therefore, teachers may, can, should create classrooms that encourage students' connection to culturally diverse literature.

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