

Controversy Vs Advocacy over the Relevance of Literature in a Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Opinions towards literature and its relevance in the EFL and ESL classrooms remain controversial; when some see in it largely a means of teaching a foreign language; others find in it no particular value. In view of that, many educators remain sceptical about the use of literature in their classes. The present paper then, attempts to shed some light on the need, the importance and the gap that any foreign language classroom may touch in the absence of literature.

Key words: literature, Teaching, Foreign language.

Résumé

Les opinions envers la littérature et son importance dans les classes de langues étrangères restent controversés ; quand certains y voient un moyen d'enseignement d'une langue étrangère; d'autres trouvent en elle aucune importance. Compte tenu de cela, de nombreux éducateurs restent sceptiques sur l'utilisation de la littérature dans leurs classes. Le présent document donc, essaie de jeter la lumière sur la nécessité, l'importance et l'écart que toute classe de langue étrangère peut toucher quand la littérature est absente.

Mots Clés: littérature, enseignement, langue étrangères.

ملخص

لا تزال أهمية تدريس النصوص الأدبية في أقسام اللغات الأجنبية محل جدل و اختلاف الدراسات المعاصرة. في حين يجد البعض إلى حد كبير أنها وسيلة ناجحة في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية، يرى البعض الآخر أن لا أهمية لها وهذا ما يجعل بعض المدرسين يقفون موقف شك في تدريسها. لذلك يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على الحاجة والفجوة التي قد يلمسها أي قسم لغة أجنبية في حال عدم تواجد هذه النصوص.

الكلمات المفتاحية : تدريس ، اللغة الأجنبية، النصوص الأدبية .

When Grammar Translation Method was in vogue, literary texts were exemplified as models of good writings; "... the aim of that method at that time was mainly being able to read literature" (Deinzer, 2007, p. 6). However, in the 1970s, teaching literature has been largely ignored in ESL (English for Specific Purpose) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes "Recent approaches to language teaching on lined, for example in Widowson (1978), Brumfit and Johnson (1979) have ignored literature teaching" (Brumfit 1986). For Mc Kay (1982), literature in language classroom has relapsed since for him; "It is easy to view any intention to literature as unnecessary" (Quoted in kzemi and Alemi (2010) [1]. Literature then has not retrieved its status until Mc Rae and Bondman have pointed out: "The ability to read literary texts with pleasure of that communicative competence of the educated native speaker, which is the final goal of foreign students and their teachers" (Quoted in Rae et al. 2008, p. 91).

Accordingly, Collie maintains: "... much literature is not to the demands of particular uses in Business, trade, travel, or tourism, advertising and so on" (198, p. 2). Shibou's Teaching Literature in ELT/ TESOL Classes for instance cites many arguments hostile to the teaching of literature in any language classroom;

- ☒ Literature demands linguistic competence [2] which can lead a novice in language learning to incomprehension and failure;
- ☒ Literature preclude the learner from acquiring linguistic competence because it is related to literary criticism, where there is no attempt to examine the use of language in a text.
- ☒ Literature could inhibit language learning process since it includes words and syntax that can lead to the creation of wrong language habits [3] or as Bruce Pattison maintains that after the literary course;

Nothing has been learned: there has only been direct imaginative experience. Any detail of the language would operate quite differently in a real life context. Its normal function is relevant only along with other details to help in getting the total effect in the literary work itself. (1969, p. 105)

- ☒ Literature neglects contemporary language since the selection of literary texts is determined on historical and aesthetic consideration rather than pedagogical one. Thus, the learner may feel conversant with a bygone register of language. Marwardt (1998) claims; [...] literature that is read should be contemporary written in modern idiom. There is little or nothing to be gained from subjecting the student to archaic forms of the language, obsolescent meanings of words, and subject matter that requires historical interpretation... (Simon. Op.cit, p. 18)

- ☒ Teaching grammar is considered as one of the main goals of any language teacher, while the orthodox use of the language in literary works may prevent it; "the creative use of language in poetry and prose often deviates from the conventions and rules that govern standard, not literary discourse..." (Op.cit, kasemi and Alemi).

However, keeping literature away from syllabus has caused anxiety amid sundry educators and learners intrigued by the social interaction in the country where the target language is used. Thence, many of them have advocated the use of literature in ELT; since for them it may stroke the heart likewise the mind. Thus, Collie urges language teachers to use literature in their classes. "...the sooner learners can start to enjoy literature in their new language, the better" (Op.cit. p. 2). Thus, it could be important to adduce its relevance

in an English language classroom:

- ☒ For those who aver that literature doesn't meet the EAP (English for Academic Purpose) and ESP (English for Specific Purpose) objectives Mc Kay (1982) maintains that it can foster learner's motivation to read and to write [4]. Consequently, his overall reading and writing proficiency can serve their academic and occupational needs.
- ☒ Literature serves as a means of enhancing learner's linguistic competence; "Exposure to literature will increase all language skills..." (Simon. Op.cit. P. 11).
- ☒ Literature could support students to communicate meaning in different contexts (school, hospital, police station, theatre and so on; "... literature provides students with a wide range of language varieties used in different situations". (Rana 2009).
- ☒ Literature brings the TESOL learners close to how the language works in real life (Ibid. Simon, p. 12).
- ☒ Literary study is relevant to the human biology as John Martin Ellis maintains; "how the individuals depicted in literature function and relate to each other" (2007, p. 25).
- ☒ Drama, fiction and poems are considered as means of delight for many learners as R. Carter and M.N long state; "Literary texts are special and bestow special enjoyment and fulfillment" (1991, p. 8).
- ☒ Literature evolves the learner's creativity when using their imagination.

Furthermore, Richard (1962) views in literature a dual objective which helps both the teacher and the learner at the same time; "we have fixed double primary objectives: to teach learners in a more methodical way, to comment on the texts presented to them and offer teachers a convenient and flexible working tool [literature]" [5]. (Ibid. Richard, 1962, p. 2)

The idea of isolating English language teaching from English literature has been rebutted by stylistics which constitutes a valuable link between the two spheres as it refers to the use of linguistics for the study of literature. Further, when using literature, learners may be exposed to humanity and its values, belief, customs and thought, as they may appreciate the language used in the literary text as well. Literature may enable learners to develop their confidence in the language and stimulate them to enjoy reading.

Moreover, 'symbiosis' is the word that David Crystal [6] has advocated to mention the symbiotic relationship between language and literature. When reading his article (1999), no one can pass over the amazing, dynamic and current preposition he suggests so as to show the extent to which language and literature run together. '@' is neither listed in grammar nor taught in classrooms, but the latter theorist sees in it the suitable preposition to divulge the extent to which both spheres are linked to each other. Thus, he proposes 'language @ literature' and 'literature @ language' instead of using divisive conjunctions such as 'language and literature', 'language but literature' or 'language or literature'.

One may come to the conclusion that despite the fact that many educators and theorists have resisted the use of literature in an (FL) classroom, others, accompanying by their cogent arguments in favour of its employment have not only won them over but they have succeeded to incorporate literature in any EFL/ESL. Carter and Long's (1991) for instance has pointed out three main models to the teaching of literature, where each one is linked to a particular set of learning objectives.

CULTURAL MODEL :

It stresses on the importance of literature in culture accumulation and vice versa. According to Hayane (1989), literature is part of culture, and that culture is indispensable for language acquisition; "It is obvious that literature is part of the culture and if we want to learn a language properly, it remains vital to know that culture which is the source of language" (Hayane 1989, p. 107)

Teaching within this model then, may enable students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from his/her own; on the one hand, "...to come to perceive traditions of thought, feeling, and artistic form within the heritage that literature of such cultures endows" (Carter and Long 1991, p. 2), as it may enhance the understanding of his culture on the other. "... we succeed in teaching cultural content with the language; the student not only acquires that knowledge but increases his understanding of his own culture as well" (Lado, 1964, p. 150).

Furthermore, the cultural model may contribute to the teaching of humanity in many parts of the world; "It is this particular human sense that gives literature a central place..." (Ibid. Lado, P. 2) Although, teaching within the last mentioned model is more teacher- and product-cantered, where the teacher focuses on the text as an artefact from which students may acquire information. Thus, no much concern is given to the individual work since learners could be unable to relate the latter to their experiences and feelings. Instead, they focus much more on knowledge accumulation and gathering information about the context and the author for instance. therefore, they find themselves equipped with knowledge about literature and not of literature.

Language-Based Model

It seeks to unveil the way language is used; it seems then to be activity-based and learner-centred since its main pre-eminence is to interpret relations between linguistic forms and literary meanings. Furthermore, it involves a set of systematic procedures such as prediction exercises, summary writing, jumbled sentences etc, as it puts emphasis on the way language functions in the text. Thus, it does not concern the literary work as a product; yet it becomes more learner-cantered and activity-based model. According to Long and Carter, teaching within this model is to see literature with a small 'l' rather than capital 'L' i.e.; that it does not regard the literary work as an art carrying its own aesthetic merits. Then, supplying the students with specific structures could spoil any pleasure that the text may support him with due to mechanistic activities orchestrated by the teacher.

In view of that, According to Pattison, "to turn a literary work into a collection of linguistic specimens it is to destroy it as a thing in its own right" (Pattison 1969, p. 105); He maintains that in spite of the fecund support that literature may provide the learner with, it has not to be confused with language learning; "While literature lessons should not be confused with language lessons, literature is very valuable in a language course.

It is valuable just because it is different from the main content and methods on language lessons” (Ibid, 1969. 105-106). However, the teacher in the language based model could become the facilitator who develops a pedagogical ‘know-how’ in the student’s mind through the direct contiguity with the text. Thus, language-based approaches may have a dual preoccupation; on one the hand they can develop learner’s linguistic competence and on the other, they may contribute in his personal development; the reason why it might be closely related to the personal-growth model.

Personal Growth Model

It is considered more student-cantered since it motivates the learner by relating the topic depicted in a literary work to his own experience. Its role is providing the reader with directions so as to enable him to construct meaning. By doing so, the learner may love and enjoy literature. Consequently, the PGM can go along with the language-based one since it enhances the personal responses to the text by “flexible-student-cantered and process-based.” (Cater and Long. Op. Cit. p. 9). Thus, amongst the main teacher’s roles in this model may be to endeavour to make her learners get pleasure from literature instead of focusing on ways of passing exams only.

To sum up, the entire above mentioned models accompanying by their converging and diverging ideas share the same goal i.e.; accumulating knowledge and acquiring language which may lead to the students’ personal development. Literature then is considered a fundamental ingredient in any English/foreign language classroom. However, the field of teaching it could hold many debates which, by and large, are based on ‘what to teach?’, ‘how teaching it?’ and how to improve it?

NOTES :

1-Alemi Minoo is a PhD candidate of Applied Linguistics and a faculty member of languages and

Linguistics Center of Sharif University of Technology (Tehran, Iran). She has published about 10

textbooks in General English and ESP.

2-See chapter two, literary competence.

3-It may be the impossibility to distinguish between the academic and the conventional language.

4-Mc Kay. Journal of Reading, volume32, (1988 p. 2-8)

5-Translation mine

6-He works currently as a writer lecturer and broadcaster on Language and Linguistics.

Among his

publications: (Listen to your Child, who Care about English Language, The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language and English as a Global Language).

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