

Empowering Foreign Language Learners to Grapple Learning Hindrances through Literary Texts

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine the place of literature in foreign language class and seeks to shed light on the positive effect its use has, either from cultural or linguistic viewpoint. However, the suitability and criteria of the literary texts selected for a foreign language class remain a crucial factor in the success of the teaching process.

Keywords: literature, foreign language class, literary texts.

1-Introduction :

It is clearly apparent that over the last few years a new trend swung back to using literature in a language context, or at least literary works are being used hand in hand with other authentic materials and consequently, opening up new perspectives to the language learner. Authentic materials in language teaching, on the other hand, are preferred over created ones. The fact is that they contain authentic language and reflect real-world uses of language. In retrospect, it has been claimed for many scholars, that literature should have a place in the curriculum. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge, both on a 'usage' level and on a 'use' level (MacKay, in Brumfit & Carter 1986). In fact, it is seen as an ideal vehicle to "serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written." (Valdez 1986). Valdez also claims the fact that literary texts do not only introduce cultural assumptions which may increase learners' understanding of foreign cultures, but also lead to promoting intercultural understanding and mutual respect. Literary texts are of important reading objectives and thus learners are not disturbed by such texts handled in the classroom.

2-The Teaching of Literature in Language Classrooms :

Carter and Long claim that teaching of English language and teaching of English literature have coexisted in many different ways in recent years. There are two contrasting extremes, in one hand, the ones who see that literature should be omitted altogether because it was judged to be impractical and unnecessary to certain specific purposes in learning the language. On the other hand, the opposite extreme considers literature as dominant. Now there is a considerable revival of interest in the study of literature in relation to language (Carter, Long, 1987). English teachers are more susceptible to introducing authentic English literary works to their learners and should conduct them to the appreciation of these works.

In teaching English as a foreign language, works of literature can be profitably introduced to learners even at very early stages of instruction. Small children are used to listen to fairy tales read by their parents or grandparents. They remember some stories very well at an extent to recount them by heart. At an upper primary school level, they are taught to read at first letters, single words, short sentences, later on poems, chants, stories, and fairy tales. Their teachers want them to elicit good or bad characters, to recognize the moral in the stories and to understand the message. Learning to read is an exciting time for children, thus it is a long-term process requiring variety of skills, patience, confidence, and encouragement.

In this respect, 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) is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays as (Kramsch and Kramsch 2000, p554) state, 'the study of language today in those days meant the study of literature'. Moreover, the teaching of literary texts gives learners the chance to practice the lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic knowledge.

Ur (1996, p. 201) states some ideas about the benefits of using literature as a resource in ELT which can be summarized in the following way:

- ☒ Literature is a very enjoyable resource to learn a language.
- ☒ Literature offers examples of different styles of writing, and also illustrations of various authentic uses of the language.
- ☒ Literature is an appropriate resource for increasing word power.
- ☒ It encourages developing various reading skills in learners.
- ☒ It can provide a springboard for useful discussion or writing.
- ☒ It involves both emotions and intellect, which overwhelms the personal development of the student.
- ☒ English literature (in general) is a part of the target culture, and hence it has great influence on learners' value framework and education.
- ☒ It encourages critical and creative thinking.
- ☒ It empowers the learners' world knowledge.
- ☒ It informs the learners of various human situations and conflicts through time.

3-The Use of Literary Texts in Foreign Language Classes :

The necessity of introducing literary texts in the language classroom is an established fact. However, the suitability of the texts selected for a particular class remains a crucial factor in the success of the teaching approach followed in that particular class. Texts chosen should not be too long, too complex linguistically and not too far removed from the world knowledge of the learners. Texts should also provide good potential for a variety of classroom activities, in order to give students more chance to gain true familiarity with any work as a whole. Most importantly, the texts should have the capacity to engage the interest of the learner. For example, as noted by Collie and Slater (1987), short stories offer greater variety than longer texts. Enabling the learner to use such tools is offering

him greater chance of finding something to appeal to each of his tastes and interests; whilst poems offer a rich, varied range and are a source of much enjoyment.

However, in many EFL contexts there are constraints/restraints on the teacher's part in terms of availability of books, or the set curriculum they are to follow. If the texts are imposed and used year after year, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain one's originality and enthusiasm, both on the parts of teachers and learners. Goodwyn and Findlay (1999) pointed out that teachers are more likely at ease when they are more inspired about a text/topic they are teaching. Nevertheless, it has already been observed that the available texts and materials can be successfully used to achieve objectives if used properly and systematically. Besides, according to Collie and Slater (1990, p3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement.

4-Criteria for Selecting Appropriate Literary Texts in FL Classes :

Choosing a text to be used in the classroom should be carefully considered. When selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the learners. However, one major factor to take into account is whether a particular work is able to reveal the kind of personal involvement by arousing the learner's interest and eliciting strong, positive reactions from them.

Reading a literary text is more likely to have a long-term and valuable effect upon the learner's linguistic knowledge when it is meaningful and amusing. Choosing books relevant to the real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner is of great importance. Language difficulty has to be considered as well. If the language of the literary work is simple, this may facilitate the comprehensibility of the literary text but is not in itself the most crucial criterion. Interest, appeal, and relevance are also prominent. Enjoyment, a fresh insight into issues felt to be related to the heart of people's concerns; the pleasure of encountering one's own thoughts or situations exemplified clearly in a work of art. In addition, the other equal pleasure of noticing those same thoughts, feelings, emotions, or situations presented by a completely new perspective: all these are motives helping learners to cope with the linguistic obstacles that might be considered too great in less involving material (Collie and Slater, 1990, p.6-7).

The fact that language teachers use literary texts does not imply that they are studying literature. They are, consequently, using literary texts to enhance language learning. Their purpose is to engage learners interactively with the text, with peer learners, and with the teacher in the performance of tasks involving literary texts. The activities would offer learners ample opportunities to contribute and share their own experiences, perceptions and opinions.

5-Conclusion :

In general, English is used at its idiomatic best and most effectively in literature. The teaching of literature would definitely help the learners improve their language skills. Good introduction to literature can compensate for the weaknesses of the linguistic approach in the area of grammar, vocabulary and syntax and can increase the learners'

competence in English. The teaching of literature can also be justified on the ground that the cultural backgrounds of the literary work would broaden the views of learners on other cultures by stirring up reflection, inducing feeling, and stimulating action. The teaching of literature helps learners in gaining not only communicative but also creative competence.

However what is lacking in most of our English classes is the integration between language and literature. So, what we need is not the abolition of Literature teaching but the right choice of the texts and a change in the methodology adopted. As far as the choice of text is concerned, it is the key to success in using literature in a language classroom. A text which is extremely difficult in linguistic or cultural levels will reap very few benefits. It is always worthwhile to use simple texts. There is a vast corpus of simple texts available within the body of literature in English. In the light of what has been said, one can readily argue that using literature in foreign language classes will persist to be treated in foreign settings with utmost care for the sole aim of equipping the learners with all that is necessary to help them cope adequately and independently with any literary text they may encounter.

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