

Literature in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Language as a means of communication has been learned and taught for centuries. For every human the learning process starts unconsciously with learning their mother tongue and later it goes on systematically and consciously at school. However, in order to carry on commercial or social relations among different communities people have to learn two or even more languages. Therefore teaching of foreign languages has been an object of interest to societies for ages. Many researchers believe that literature is useful in English language teaching. Value of literature as a useful source in language teaching is strongly defended by these researchers. Literature has a number of benefits which include but are not limited to availability of unique material, stimulation of reader's development and contribution to reader's vocabulary and cultural enrichment. Along with the abovementioned benefits diversity, interest, and vagueness, and universality, could be named as other advantages. This study reveals that literature increases all language skills since it extends linguistic knowledge through giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage. Furthermore, it gives students the opportunity to strengthen language skills as it often enables oral discussions and exchange of opinions.

Keywords: *Language, English language, literature, teaching, language classroom, language skills.*

1. Introduction

According to The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English¹, language generally is defined as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular country or area. Language distinguishes human species from other living species. With the use of language for instance, human species have been able to make inventions, communicate ideas and spread such inventions and ideas from generation to generation. Nations or communities are distinct from one another mainly based on the language they speak and this is the key factor that shapes their identities. Considering the number of languages which exceeds a thousand, the need to learn languages of other societies emerges as a must, especially in a world, that has never been as interconnected as it is today. This interconnectedness has made it manifest that learning a second language unites people and builds a common way to understand each other. Today, as a result of globalization, there has been an increasing need to interact at both official and unofficial levels. In particular, nations of different countries have to move from one geographical region to another, needing a language of communication. In this case, some languages such as English, French, Spanish, German and Arabic have become what can be described as second language in many communities of the world. In other words, they have become the language of communication, interaction and relationship. For this reason, these languages mentioned above, need to be learnt if we want to develop along with others. In our fast-paced global world, languages are of great importance and the need for a widely speaking language is undeniable. This need has found an easy way and mainly addressed with English, the language of two "super powers", namely the U.S.A and the U.K. English has taken the role of the prevailing language in diplomacy, economy, education, culture and now online communication as the widest-spread language of the world. Latest studies in this regard clearly indicate that English is far ahead used than any other languages, be it Chinese, Indian or Arabic that are spoken by countries with vast geographies. Exchanges in trade, culture and economy have

¹ Longman dictionary of contemporary English (2007). Harlow, England: Longman.

enormously increased interaction between nations which have made borders almost vanish. English that is spoken by many people is thought as a second language in many countries around the world. Speaking English has almost been mandatory, and this path seems to be irreversible as the world gets smaller and becomes coined as a “global village”. Thus, use of a common language occurs to be the first and foremost need of today’s world. A world replete with international organizations, multinational companies, NGOs and many other platforms that bring people with different languages together makes it indispensable to gather under an umbrella of one language that would be second one to many. Needless to say, social networks like Twitter and Facebook are the most current phenomena in this connection. Learning a new language is just an implication of expanding the education, social interaction, diversifying cultures, broadening the psychological view and putting in function the conceptual thinking of the youth. On the other hand, the importance of integration for the states to the international society is obvious. And this is not only to be measured by statistics or trade numbers. Societies with high number of educated people who speak multiple languages are more prone to adopt any changes or development happening out of their countries—which is an indication of integration. Moreover, know-how, new inventions and technologies could only be transferred through these educated people. Corollary of the facts mentioned above, English has also been a language mainly spoken in all western Balkan regions. English is taught to students starting from primary school in this geography. Furthermore, teaching English has been a major criterion for schools to be chosen by students and speaking English has been the main requirement to be recruited by prestigious institutions or to hold a high administrative position at work. More importantly, students who are fluent speakers, readers, and writers are able to find work after they graduate because of the global demand to for the English language. English is not only a compulsory course at primary and secondary schools, but also at universities. This indicates the importance attached to use of proper and academic English.

Learning a foreign language is not limited to learning its grammar. Learning a language means getting familiar with the culture, geography and socio-economic structure of the targeted language. It is important to know the history of the people, their traditions, customs and values for better communication. Once students are exposed to these aspects, they will know the reasons for using particular words in certain situations and they will be able to discern nuances between meanings of similar words. Most importantly, once exposed to the country where the language is spoken, they will be able to understand the cultural underpinnings of the language. The most effective way to reach all these aims and to improve the use of language skills of students is to use literary texts suitable for the level of students in foreign language teaching.

2. Language and Literature

A National Curriculum Guideline for high schools in Sweden stress the importance English obtains as an international language and that students must view English as a “lifelong skill that can be further developed after completed schooling and the importance of students being motivated to want to improve their skills both while at school and afterwards” Norling¹. In regards to studying English literature, the aim of the curriculum is on the improvement of the students’ ability to read “literature in English with good understanding and reflect over texts from different perspectives,” Norling². Being able to read and reflect on texts with and from different perspectives allows students to widen their perception of the world around them.

Literary works such as poetries, novels, stories, or plays should be used in foreign language teaching because these works include all the features needed to teach a foreign language. Collie and Slater³ mention four reasons why a language teacher should use literary texts with classes; to serve as authentic material, to enrich language as it provides various features of written language, to enhance understanding of different cultures and to enable personal involvement as imagination moves learners from structure to the story itself.

¹ Norling, T. (2009). Aims and objectives in the teaching of English literature at upper secondary school. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:292256/fulltext01>

² Norling, T. (2009). Aims and objectives in the teaching of English literature at upper secondary school. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:292256/fulltext01>

³ Collie, J., & Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Parkinson and Reid Thomas¹ have discussed on the study of Sell², who has mentioned the positive effects of literature on students' learning English as the second language. One of the main points is cultural diversity approach, which will help new generations to consider diversity in culture more acceptable and an important feature toward development and growth of the states, as collaboration is built up upon cultural flexibility and acceptability for other nationalities and cultures. Reading new literature increases the awareness and understanding of students for new cultures and diverse "living rules". It can be emphasized that literature is a kind of historical document which contains precise information about the time was written and society that prevailed. So literature not only gives us pleasure, but also factual information about different periods and society. Literature study crystallizes man and teaches them the art of living; it is the mirror of our reality. Literature contains all thoughts of prominent people, pleasure, happiness or their pain. According to Ur³ cited by Tasneen⁴ the advantages of literature as a language teaching resource can be summarized in the following way:

1. Literature is a very enjoyable resource to learn a language.
2. Literature provides examples of different styles of writing, and also representations of various authentic uses of the language.
3. Literature is a good resource for increasing word power.
4. It encourages developing various reading skills in learners.
5. It can be used as a springboard for exciting discussion or writing.
6. It involves both emotions and intellect, which adds to the motivation and may contribute to the personal development of the student.
7. English literature (in general) is a part of the target culture, and therefore it has a value as part of the learners' general education.
8. It encourages critical and creative thinking.
9. It enriches the students' world knowledge.
10. It makes the students aware of various human situations and conflicts.

Povey⁵ mentions that "Literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge". Thus, literature can serve as effective and valuable material to improve students' writing, reading listening and speaking skills.

3. Literary texts and writing skills

Literary texts can be used as a source or a model in teaching and developing writing skills. The usage of literary texts in writing classes gives us objective information about how well the students have learned or in which parts they are missing out in learning the language. The texts that the students write, give us an idea about the ability of them to analyze.

¹ Parkinson, B. and H. Reid Thomas.2000. Teaching Literature in a Second Language. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

² Sell, Jonathan P.A. (2005). "Why teach literature in the English language classroom?". Encuentro Journal of Research and Innovation in the Language Classroom, pp. 86-93.

³ Ur, Penny (1996) A Course in Language Teaching; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.p.201

⁴ Tasneen, W. (2010). Literary texts in the language classroom: A study of teachers' and students' views at international schools in Bangkok. Asian EFL Journal Volume 12 Issue 4

⁵ Povey, J. 1972. Literature in TESL programs: The language and the culture. In H. Allen and R. Campbell (ed.) Teaching English as a second language. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1972.

a) Controlled Writing

Using literary texts which are suitable for the level of students in practicing some grammar topics may help teachers to teach grammar in an enjoyable way and develop listening skills of the students. In this activity, to practice different tenses in English, the teacher reads a story in one tense and asks the students to re-write the same story with a different tense. For example, the teacher may read a story which is written in present tense and asks students to re-write the same story as if it happened last year.

b) Writing a letter

This activity will help students develop their writing and reading skills. A story with a number of four or five characters is given to students to be read as homework. The next lesson, having warmed up by summarizing the plot and paying attention to some chosen sentences to enable students enjoy the beauty of literature, students are divided into groups in class according to the number of the characters in the story. The teacher assigns a character to each group and each group as an individual writes a letter to another group telling their circumstances and they may ask for help, offer help, make a deal etc. So, each group representing a character from the story writes and receives a letter and each group has to answer the received letter. A group member reads their group's letter in front of the class and a student from the addressed group reads their answer.

4. Literary texts and Reading Skills

Using literary texts in teaching English as a foreign language and introducing English literature to students motivate and encourage students to read literature. Easy-to-understand literary texts can play an incentive and introductive role at the beginning while difficult ones as they appear in historical, biographical texts, poetries and articles help students to understand the language in depth.

a) Reading out loud

The goal of this activity is to help students learn the characteristics of speaking such as: intonation, rhythm, stress and pronunciation. In the first stage, students are divided into groups and each group is given a part of a well-known poem which is suitable for students' English level. The teacher underlines some words from the poem and asks students to be ready to read it out loud with the right pronunciation, intonation and stress, and to find synonyms for the underlined words as homework. The next lesson the teacher allows the groups to read their part within the group and choose the best reciter. Then the teacher chooses the groups in a random order and asks the reciter of each group to read their part. The next task is to put the stanzas in the right order as a reading comprehension activity. After that, the teacher reads the entire poem paying attention to intonation; stress and pronunciation or make students listen to the original recording twice or more if necessary. Having practiced the reciting, the teacher asks a group member to read the underlined words to the other groups and the first group that has found the synonym gets a point. If none of the groups find the synonym in a given time, the group that has asked the word gets a point. At the end, the group with the highest total point is announced as the winner.

b) Similar reading texts

According to Collie and Slater¹ as a reading assignment, different reading pieces can be given out, such as poetry, essays or stories. The similarities or differences of plots, characters or types can be discussed in class. For example, while one group of students read one version of the story, the other group may read another version of the story. When they finish reading, they ask questions to each other in order to find differences and similarities in the stories. This activity can be used as a reading comprehension activity as the students have to find out the differences between the stories or as a discussion to see how much the differences matter.

¹ Collie, J., & Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

5. Speaking and listening skills

Besides reading and writing, literature can also be a great source for listening and speaking skills. Teachers need to create free discussion platforms or ask students to prepare presentations on different topics to help them practice the language they are learning or improve their proficiency level. Literary texts are great sources for free discussions in the class and this will not only improve speaking skills but also listening, writing and reading skills.

a) Verbal summary

The teacher can give out a short story to be read as homework and ask students to write a summary of the story at home. In class all students are asked to go through their own summaries and eliminate one or two important parts of the story. Then, the teacher randomly asks some students to retell their summaries with the missing parts. As students will try to catch the missing parts while listening to their peer's story this activity can be used as a valuable listening activity. Having found out which important parts of the story have been missed out, the other students try to explain and discuss why those parts of the story should not be missed. The teacher can play a provocative role here by supporting arguments of both sides.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, majority of indicators mention strong favouring of literature teaching in the English classroom to increase student's skills and knowledge. As it has been widely accepted incorporating literature in language teaching is considered to be very advantageous. Literature usage as resource in English learning classrooms increases creativity and ability of writing, reading and appreciation for language. It also encourages oral skills and personal opinion expression. This exercise leads to student's enhanced ability to make critical and analytical summaries to literature texts. Literature is the best way to make people understand that language is learned more appropriate when it is learned by reading literature. All the above mentioned benefits cannot be gained through grammatical learning or academic books that students have the chance to see in high school. Literature is the key to right pathway toward the benefits of a new language, as through literature reading students have the change of autonomously choosing the diversification of their culture and knowledge

Literature is integral part of language and languages are enriched with literary works. Considering literature as important cultural asset, it could be claimed that literary works should be used as an effective instrument in teaching foreign languages, including the most commonly spoken language, English.

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