

## Literature as an Effective Tool in Language Teaching

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the effectiveness of using Literature in English language teaching. Literature as a separate subject of study has been widely popular, but its importance in teaching English language in the EFL/ESL classroom has been debatable. This article discusses how literature can be used as an effective tool in language learning. Texts from different genres of Literature could be used as resources for linguistic input helping learners to practice all four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing in addition to learning new vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Literary text, Language teaching, classroom, ESL, tool.

### **Introduction**

As an ELT practitioner, I have always tried to use literature as an effective tool in language teaching. Although literature has exclusively been reserved for the most advanced level of study, its importance in language teaching cannot be denied. The demand for the use of literature in language teaching has evoked the interest of language teachers since the 1980s.

Literature though far removed from the utterances of everyday communication serves as an authentic material in language classrooms. Learners need to be acquainted with different genre of literary texts like short story, drama, poetry and novel. They need to become familiar with varied patterns of social interaction and cultural connotations in the country which uses the target language of their choice. The fascinating world of fiction portrays a chain of interactions in different contextualized situations. Literature provides rich materials with emotional colour, its appeal to the reader is overwhelming. It touches the heart and mind of the reader as its contents gradually become assimilated within him. He can relate to it through his own life experiences, it becomes a reflection of his own life, something deeply personal, very close to his heart and worth remembering.

### **Literature & Language – a link**

Literary texts take into account the functions of language in a wide variety of realistic situation. We find a bridge connecting life and literature, literature and language, and again language and life. In any society, these components are all very important and inseparable.

Life provides a base from which language evolves and using this language, literary works are created. Literature is one of the best tools to master a language. There is within us an innate ability to understand the conventions of story-telling. With this, we are able to enjoy literature and appreciate its meaning. It is this implicit competence within us that helps us to make the utmost use of literature in language teaching.

### **The Language used**

The language of literature is however not the language of everyday communication – it is unique in its own way, what with the jugglery of words, it is at times intense and elaborate, at times easy and lucid and often very apt. Through literature, we explore language in all its form. Moreover, literary texts integrate linguistic competence with communicative competence thereby putting language into use in multiple social situations. Literature thus encourages interaction. Literary texts are often rich in innumerable layers of meaning and can be effectively mixed for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions.

### **Selection of Literary text**

Literature provides interesting subject matter that has the power to motivate learners and help them in exploring the possibilities of usages thereby enhancing their language competence in a big way. Learners get a chance to express their ideas or react similarly in a given situation. The subject matter of literary texts must be authentic based on social and palpable realities. Every good work of literature enthuses feelings through words and draws the reader from a restricted, formulaic structured use of words to a non-restrictive usage of language in a way that attracts language learning

The selection of literary text should be made judiciously, keeping in mind the level of learners. To begin with, language learners may be given books written in simple language, relevant to their life experiences, emotions or dreams. An ideal way of introducing ESL learners to literature is through short stories. They offer practical advantages to the teacher. Their lengths are such that they can usually be read entirely within one or two classes. A short story offers ample variety and appeal to each learner's taste and interest. The reader gradually becomes involved in the story. Looking for, the meanings of particular words become far less important to him, than pursuing the storyline. He is eager to find out what happens next, as events gradually unfold, he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. He is gradually drawn to the extraordinary world of fiction and a creative relationship is soon established between the reader and the text.

### **Classroom Activities**

An array of enjoyable activities within a literary text can prove to be immensely helpful. Reading a text can become a combination of classroom and private reading. Sometimes learners may find the initial encounter with the book too daunting. The teacher can spend some time on orientation and warm-up sessions before the book is actually begun. Lexical difficulties can be sorted out, a background created to make the first reading experience easier and more rewarding. The mood is thus set, the interest created and the curiosity aroused. Once the scene is set and the students' curiosity kindled, the teacher draws the attention of the students to the title of the book and asks them to speculate the story or theme of the book. Visuals and prompts like photos, pictures are often useful in eliciting the response of students regarding the central theme of a story or novel. Key sentences and words are extracted from the text by the teacher – these produce a somewhat more contextualized

framework to guess meaning of words or deduce the meaning as a whole. Each piece of literary work can spark off a wide variety of activities. Tasks and activities based on the literary text provide valuable practice in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

However, literature in the language classroom, should always be taught in an integrated way. Teachers should try to teach basic language skills as an integral part of oral and written language use, for creating both referential and interactional meaning, not merely as an aspect of the oral and written production of words, phrases and sentences.

### **Learner-centred Activities**

For a better understanding of literary texts, ESL / EFL teachers need to take a dynamic, student-centered approach. In a reading lesson, discussion could begin at the literal level with direct questions of fact regarding setting, characters, and plot which can be answered by specific reference to the text. When students master literal understanding, they move on to the inferential level, where they must speculate and interpret the characters, setting, and theme, and where they can analyse the author's point of view. After comprehending the selected piece, at the literal and inferential level, students can move on to collaborative work. This calls for further activities like general class discussion, small-group work, panel discussions, and debates. Reading literature aloud contributes to developing speaking as well as listening ability. Moreover, it also leads to improving pronunciation. Pronunciation may be the focus before, during, and / or after the reading.

### **Literature and Writing**

Literature can also provide a rich context for writing activities in the classroom. Literature could also act as a great resource for writing for a wide variety of subject matter. Literature houses an immense variety of themes to write on, in terms of guided, free, controlled and other types of writing. Writing activity comprises techniques like paraphrase, summary, and adaptation. In paraphrasing, students are required to use their own words and rephrase the subject of a given text. Paraphrasing helps in students' trying to make sense of a poem; it could be a remarkably useful tool with poetry. Summarizing a text goes well with realistic short stories and plays, where events normally follow a chronological order and have concrete elements like plot, setting, and character to guide a student's writing. Adaptation from a literary piece may include rewriting a prose fiction in dialogue or, reversely, rewriting a play or a scene into narrative.

### **Reading, Speaking, and Listening**

The study of literature in a language class, though mainly associated with reading and writing, can play a vital role in teaching both speaking and listening. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-playing, pantomiming, reenactment, discussion, and group activities may revolve round a work of literature.

### **Listening Literary Content**

Language teachers can make listening comprehension interesting and even work on the pronunciation and enunciation of learners. The listening material needs to be contextualized and the most effective way is to play an audio or video of a literary work, or read aloud from a literary text. Listening practices are easier now as a number of literary works are available in the form of audio books which can be played to generate learners' interest and provide practice in listening. Listening to an interesting literary piece (story or play) will be thoroughly enjoyed by learners as they hear with rapt attention.

### **Dramatic Adaptations**

Using drama in a language classroom is another excellent resource for language teaching. The use of drama could make learners aware not only of the language but also of the culture that is specific to the target language. In this context, the use of drama as a tool rather than an end gains importance in teaching a foreign language. Since drama is a depiction of the life and times, students grow their personality and get to know varied codes of behaviour. Having finished reading a story, students may be asked to consider it for role play. Literature-based dramatic activities are valuable for ESL / EFL learners. They facilitate and accelerate development of oral skills as students achieve a clearer comprehension of the plot and a deeper insight into characterization. Dramatization requires classroom performance of scripted materials. Students could be encouraged to write their own scripts for short stories or sections of novels, adapting them to contemporary times. Based on the story, they must guess what the characters would say and how they would say it. Students may thus read assigned sections of dialogues in advance and rehearse the scenes with their partners. Moreover, they discuss semiotic aspects of staging a scene (i.e. facial expressions, gestures, and the physical aspects). Finally, the dramatization is ready to be presented before the class and a video recording of it can be made for future analysis and reference.

### **Benefits of Using Poetry**

Moving on to poetry we may say, that poetry offers a rich, varied repertoire and are a great source of enjoyment for teachers and learners alike. Poetry explores themes of universal concern. It functions, within the parameters of certain literary devices, language variety and syntactic patterns, which to a large extent fall in the domain of literature alone. Literary devices, like metaphor, structural ambiguity, alliteration, create an atmosphere of meanings through their subtle usages. When we examine our everyday language, we notice with an astonishing realization, that all these play a great role in shaping our speech and our daily discourse, as when we alarmingly say 'Beware of him' or when we imply a very rare occurrence saying 'once in a blue moon'. The use of structural ambiguity in literature suggests the use of language in many different ways. Ambiguity finds its place in advertising slogans, in captions for cartoon and even in general anecdotes. English poetry abounds in alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of the same sounds usually at the beginning of a word or syllable. Many poets use this device for various special effects. Today alliteration creeps into our daily discourse in common but meaningful expressions like 'where there's a will there's a way' or 'through thick and thin' or 'fair is foul and foul is fair'

### **Conclusion**

The teaching of literature can help students derive the benefits of communication and language improvement. Literature opens the window to intellectual awareness while at the same time nurturing empathy, a tolerance for diversity, love for humanity and the fostering of intelligence. Learners should have access to some great literary works from the finest and most abundant treasures of English literature. Language Teachers need to understand the importance and effectiveness of using impressive and interesting literary content in language teaching. There is no denying the fact, in the light of the observations made in this article, literature can play a stimulating role in the acquisition of language. Literature explores life in a myriad of colours, it not only develops language skills among non-native learners of

English but also has a direct impact on the learner's ability to use language in real life situations and communicate with fluidity of expression.

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