

Using Literary Texts in English Language Education: Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract: *This article explores the benefits of using literary texts in English course materials. We argue that literary texts provide authentic and engaging material for language learners, exposing them to different cultures and ways of life and helping them to develop cultural awareness and understanding. We also discuss the ways in which literary texts can improve critical thinking skills, vocabulary and grammar skills, and reading comprehension. We provide specific examples of how literary texts can be used in language education, as well as strategies for scaffolding literary texts to maximize the benefit for learners. Finally, we consider some of the challenges of using literary texts in English course materials and suggest ways to address these challenges. Overall, our analysis indicates that literary texts have numerous benefits when used in English course materials and can be an effective tool for language learning.*

Keywords: literary texts, English language courses, cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, vocabulary, reading comprehension, language education, scaffolding, challenges

1. Introduction

The use of literary texts in English language course books has long been a subject of debate and discussion among educators. Some argue that the inclusion of literary texts in course materials can enhance students' language skills and cultural awareness, while others claim that such texts can be difficult for students to understand and may not be relevant to their language learning goals.

Literary texts are an important component of English language courses and are often included in English course books to help students improve their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. These texts can range from short stories and poems to plays and novels, and can be written by a variety of authors from different time periods and cultural backgrounds.

One of the main reasons for including literary texts in English course books is to expose students to different writing styles and techniques. By reading a variety of literary works, students can learn about different narrative structures, literary devices, and figurative language, which can help them understand and analyze texts more effectively.

Another benefit of studying literary texts is that they often deal with themes and issues that are universal and timeless, such as love, loss, and identity. Reading these texts can help students expand their cultural knowledge and broaden their perspective on the world.

In addition, literary texts can also help students improve their vocabulary and language skills. Many literary works contain rich, descriptive language and complex sentence structures, which can challenge students to think more critically and use their language skills to fully understand the text.

Overall, literary texts are a valuable resource for English language learners and can help them develop their reading,

writing, and critical thinking skills. By studying a diverse range of literary works, students can gain a deeper understanding of the English language and culture, and become more proficient in their language skills (Carter, R., & Long, 1991). This paper aims to explore the role of literary texts in English course books and examine their potential benefits and challenges for language learners.

2. Background

The inclusion of literary texts in English language course materials is not a new concept. In fact, literary texts have been used in language education for centuries, with the belief that they can help students develop their language skills and broaden their cultural knowledge. In recent years, however, the use of literary texts in English course books has come under scrutiny, with some educators arguing that they may not be the most effective way to teach language skills (Lazar, 2003; Carter & Long, 1991)

Benefits of using literary texts in English course books:

Despite these criticisms, there are several potential benefits to using literary texts in English language course materials. Firstly, literary texts can provide authentic and engaging material for language learners. By reading literary texts, students can practice their language skills in a more realistic and enjoyable context, rather than simply completing exercises and drills. In addition, literary texts can expose students to different cultures and ways of life, helping them to develop cultural awareness and understanding.

Furthermore, literary texts can also help to improve students' critical thinking skills. By analyzing and interpreting literary texts, students can learn to analyze and interpret different forms of language, which can be useful in other areas of language learning, such as understanding news articles or business documents (Lazar, 2003; Carter & Long, 1991; Willis et al., 2007).

Many researchers have agreed that the use of literary texts in language education can be very beneficial for the learner's

adaptation of the target language in many ways; Gillian Lazar, Slater, Calter and many other authors all state and discuss the benefits of using literature in language education and provides several examples of how literary texts can be used to enhance language skills and cultural knowledge. Here are a few examples from the articles:

- 1) **Authentic and engaging material:** Lazar and others, argue that literary texts provide authentic and engaging material for language learners, as they offer a more realistic and enjoyable context for practicing language skills. They cite the example of using a novel to practice reading comprehension and vocabulary skills, rather than simply completing exercises and drills.
- 2) **Cultural awareness and understanding:** the authors also, note that literary texts can expose students to different cultures and ways of life, helping them to develop cultural awareness and understanding. They suggest using literary texts to introduce students to cultural themes and issues, such as prejudice, conflict, and social justice.
- 3) **Improved critical thinking skills:** Lazar and others, argue that analyzing and interpreting literary texts can help to improve students' critical thinking skills, as they must analyze and interpret different forms of language. They suggest using literary texts to encourage students to think critically about characters, plot, and themes.
- 4) **Improved vocabulary and grammar skills:** the authors also note that reading literary texts can help to improve students' vocabulary and grammar skills, as they encounter new words and structures in the context of the text. They suggest providing vocabulary lists and grammar exercises related to the text to maximize the benefit of using literary texts in this way.
- 5) **Improved reading comprehension:** Finally, Lazar and others, argue that reading literary texts can also improve students' reading comprehension skills, as they must understand and interpret the meaning of the text. He suggests providing pre-reading activities and discussion questions to help students better understand and engage with the material.

Challenges of using literary texts in English course books:

Despite the potential benefits of using literary texts in English language course materials, there are also several challenges that educators should be aware of. Firstly, literary texts can be difficult for students to understand, particularly if they are not familiar with the cultural context or the language used in the text. This can lead to frustration and discourage students from engaging with the material.

Additionally, literary texts may not always be relevant to students' language learning goals. While literary texts can provide cultural knowledge and improve critical thinking skills, they may not always be directly related to the language skills that students are trying to develop, such as grammar or vocabulary.

In her article "The Use of Literature in the EFL Classroom: A Review," (Cristina Pardo-Ballester, 2007) discusses some of the challenges of using literature in language education. Here are a few examples from the article of the challenges she mentions:

Adapting texts to the language level of learners: Pardo-Ballester notes that one challenge of using literature in language education is the need to adapt texts to the language level of learners. She explains that literary texts are often written in more advanced language than what students are typically exposed to in language courses, so teachers may need to provide additional support to help students understand the material. This can involve breaking texts down into shorter sections, providing vocabulary lists, or providing additional explanations or discussions to help students better understand the text.

Potential for cultural misunderstandings: Pardo-Ballester also discusses the potential for cultural misunderstandings when using literature in language education. She explains that literature often reflects the culture and values of the society in which it was written, and students from different cultural backgrounds may not be familiar with these cultural references or may interpret them differently. Teachers may need to provide additional context or explanations to help students better understand the cultural elements of the text.

Time and resources required: Pardo-Ballester also discusses the time and resources that may be required to effectively incorporate literature into language education.

Strategies for scaffolding literary texts:

Using literary texts in English language education can be challenging for some students, particularly if they have limited prior knowledge or language skills. To maximize the benefit of literary texts for these students, it is important to use scaffolding strategies. One such strategy is to provide background information and context to help students understand the text. This could include introducing key vocabulary or concepts, or providing historical or cultural context for the text. Another strategy is to break the text down into smaller chunks and providing support as needed, such as offering translations for difficult words or providing summaries of key points. It is also important to give students time to process the text and encourage them to ask questions and share their thoughts and reactions to the text.

In general, Lazar believes that literary texts can be very beneficial in English language teaching, as they provide authentic and engaging materials that can help to develop students' language skills and cultural knowledge. However, Lazar also acknowledges that there are some challenges to using literary texts in the classroom, such as the need to select appropriate texts and activities, and the need to address potential challenges related to students' background knowledge and cultural expectations.

Some of the specific benefits that Lazar identifies for using literary texts in English language teaching include:

Providing authentic language and cultural contexts: Literary texts are written by native speakers and often reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and perspectives of the time and place in which they were written. This can help students to develop a deeper understanding of English-speaking cultures and to gain exposure to a wide range of language registers, dialects, and styles (Lazar, 2003).

Promoting critical thinking and discussion: Literary texts often present complex themes and ideas that can stimulate students' critical thinking and encourage discussion and debate. This can help to engage students in the learning process and develop their analytical and communication skills (Lazar, 2003).

Enhancing creativity and self-expression: Literary texts can also provide opportunities for students to express themselves creatively and develop their own interpretations and responses to the text (Lazar, 2003). This can help to foster a sense of self-expression and creativity in the classroom.

Some of the challenges that Lazar highlights in using literary texts in English language teaching include:

Selecting appropriate texts and activities: It is important to select literary texts that are appropriate for the language level and interests of the students. Teachers also need to consider the cultural context and potential challenges that students may face when reading and interpreting the text (Lazar, 2003).

Addressing potential challenges related to students' background knowledge and cultural expectations: Students may have different levels of prior knowledge and cultural expectations that can influence their interpretation of the text. Teachers need to be aware of these differences and work to create a safe and inclusive learning environment where all students feel comfortable participating in the discussion (Lazar, 2003).

Managing time and resources: Using literary texts in the classroom can be time-consuming, as it requires careful planning and preparation. Teachers need to be mindful of the time and resources available and ensure that they are using them effectively.

Examples of literary texts used in English course books

- 1) Example of a literary text used in an English course book: "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee. This classic novel tells the story of a young girl growing up in the Deep South during the 1930s and deals with themes of racism and social justice. It could be used to expose students to different cultural perspectives and help them develop their critical thinking skills by analyzing and interpreting the characters' actions and motivations.
- 2) Example of a challenge of using literary texts in English course materials: A student who is not familiar with the cultural context of a literary text may find it difficult to understand and engage with the material. For example, a student who has never lived in the United States may struggle to understand the social and historical context of "To Kill a Mockingbird," which could lead to frustration and discourage the student from continuing to read the text.
- 3) Example of a literary text that may not be relevant to students' language learning goals: A student who is primarily interested in improving their business English skills may not find a literary text like "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen to be particularly relevant to their goals. While the text may be enjoyable and provide

some cultural knowledge, it may not directly address the language skills that the student is trying to improve.

- 4) Example of appropriately scaffolding a literary text to maximize benefit for learners: An educator who is using "To Kill a Mockingbird" in an English course may provide background information on the historical and cultural context of the text, as well as pre-reading activities and discussion questions to help students better understand and engage with the material. They may also provide vocabulary lists and grammar exercises related to the text to help students improve their language skills.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, literary texts can be a valuable resource for English language learners, as they can expose students to different cultures and ways of life, improve critical thinking skills, and increase vocabulary and grammar skills. However, it is important to consider the challenges that may arise when using literary texts in language education, such as difficulty in understanding and relevance to language learning goals. By scaffolding literary texts and addressing these challenges, educators can effectively incorporate literary texts into English course materials and maximize their benefits for learners. Overall, our analysis indicates that the use of literary texts in English course materials can be an effective tool for language learning and cultural awareness.

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