

English Language Teaching and Learning through Literature: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract: *Literature is the media of teaching and learning authentic language. The language of literature is well-organized and wonderful choice of diction. Language generally represents literature. The recent historical positions regarding the use of literature in English language teaching, and the inclusion of literary texts may foster the development of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills. This is the reason why, this paper argues for the use of literature for language teaching purposes. More important, it claims consistently that the use of literature for language teaching purposes can promote literary understanding and general linguistic awareness among teachers and learners.*

Keywords: Literature, Language, Skills development, Motivation, Oppositions and Resistances

1. Introduction

Literature is the main vehicle for teaching and learning language. Literature is the proper place where language gets the superb position. Literary works provided additional material of grammar practice, vocabulary learning, translation (Liaw 2001; cited in Khatib, Hossein and Rahimi 2012:p.32). This is why, Language is learnt through literature. Actually, Language teaching is a process whose aim changes not only from country to country and culture to culture but from individual to individual. In fact, it is up to individuals to decide whether literature will be somehow included in the course syllabus or particular lesson plans. If so, teachers then have to decide on which texts to include, for what purposes to use them and what activities will be done to explore the texts and promote language development. If literary works are selected according to the needs, level of learners, and age of learners, then Literature will be the effective for teaching and learning Language.

What is Literature? There are several definitions of Literature from different points of view. The most general definition can be seen in H.L.B. Moody's approach. According to Moody, literature is like umbrella term giving information on every business (Moody, 1971:1, cited in Turker 1991: p.299). Therefore literature, having interested in every kinds of written and spoken business, can be the best media of expressing a specific subject e.g. literature for language learning, literature for child raising, literature for communication, literature for construction, literature for medicine, literature for business, and literature for the author's style. Sonia Zyngier (1994) holds that, a literary text should be regarded as an instance of aesthetic communication. If we go on to define "Literature" from the Language Teaching point of view, we come across a very important definition. According to Alexander Baird, "Literature is the use of language effectively in suitable conditions" (Arthur Baird 1968:203, cited in Turker 199:p-300). To him literary texts can be used in language teaching, because the language used in literary text is suitable for the contexts of the events. Among the functions of literature, as seen in the definitions above, the most important one is the use of language. Foreign language teachers adopt the method in accordance with the students' level and their

syllabus. This is the reason why, Literature becomes the best media of teaching and learning Language.

The Place of Literature in ELT

From the 1950s to early 1980s English language teaching was dominated by discourses that advanced very pragmatic approaches to language, where communicative competence and specific practical and functional purposes were the main concerns. Approaches focused on using language in social situations and syllabuses were designed along 'functional/notional lines' (Brumfit, 1985 p. 6). There was little space for creativity and literature in such language teaching context.(cited in Lima 2010:p.110) But the 1980 decade saw a remarkable revival of interest in literature in language courses. Many researchers claim that literature has created a fresh and impressive atmosphere in which never before have literary texts been as highly regarded as one of the most valuable resources available in EFL classrooms.(cited in Thom 2008:p.120) In the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first things began to change and literature started to be considered as a potential source for language development (Hall, 2005), perhaps even because teachers on the ground always suspected that there was something wrong in neglecting such a rich source of language input (Lima, 2005,cited in Lima 2010:p.110)). Therefore, literature still has a strong place in the mainstream of language teaching materials.

Use of Literature in Language Teaching

The use of literature in the EFL classes was also supported by McKay (1982), who argued that "... literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use level. Secondly, to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. It may also enhance students' understanding of a foreign culture and perhaps "spur their own creation of imaginative works." Brumfit (1986) shared the same idea that literature was a skill subject, not content subject and stressed the potential of literature in enhancing the reading skills. (p.277) Literature is viewed as a rich resource for language learning. To Brumfit and Carter (1986), literary texts contain lots of

meaningful contexts in which linguistic components such as lexical items and grammatical structures are used in a natural way. By this I mean, the students will be able to be exposed to a variety of unexpected uses and types of linguistic expressions. Then they gradually gain familiarity with different linguistic uses, conventional forms of written mode and develop their communicative capacity. With this aspect, literature offers learners a chance to process and interpret new language in a specific context. Loff (1988) introduced literature because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax". Moreover, literature can meet the target objectives of communicative language teaching as it accelerates interpretations, classroom discussions and interactions among students as well as interactions between teacher and students as mentioned in Maley's research. Study by Van (2009) also showed that literature is full of instances of real-life language in various situations; it provides lots of opportunities for students to improve syntactic, pragmatic, cultural, and discoursed awareness among learners.

Why Use Literary Texts?

The arguments for the use of literary texts in the language classroom are many. Some scholars like Enkvist statements that 'to "know" a language you must cope not only with menus, laundry lists and telephone books, but also with novels, plays and sonnets. Literature is part of language, in more senses than one. And unless you know something of the literature of a language, you do not really "know" the language' (MacCabe, 1985, p. 47, cited in Zyngier 1994:p-6). Zyngier (1994) states that literary texts are intellectually stimulating. They allow readers to create worlds with which they may not be familiar and the way they do it is by relying on language. In building meaning, the reader reconstructs or re-creates what he or she thinks the writer is trying to communicate. In this sense, the reader becomes a performer, an actor in a communicative event.(cited in Zyngier 1994:p-6) The examination of the language of the poem enables the reader to experience events similar to those which have taken place in the poet's mind. In the course of searching for intelligibility and working through language, the reader performs an act of the imagination. Thus poem stands as an illustration that words do not mean in isolation, that 'the complete meaning of a word is always contextual' (Firth, J. 1935, 1958, p.7, cited in Zyngier 1994:p-8). Therefore, we can claim that the teaching of literature in language classrooms is a fast-growing phenomenon, although many language teachers are still reluctant to work with literary texts. Povey (1972:187), in summarizing the aims of using literature in ESL classes, argues that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax." Many experts as well as many teachers of this country like to see some pieces of literature in teaching materials (Huda 2004, p.131).They believe that literary texts in language teaching materials bring new flavour for learners and their beliefs in this regard conform to the views of Short and Candlin (1984) who hold that many students enjoy literature and so literature can be potentially useful for language teaching and learning. English language learning generally happens to be a boring prosaic and monotonous task for the students of this

country if the materials they use are purely language-based, divorced from any kind of aesthetic value. Therefore, inclusion of some pieces of literature in materials will bring variety, making the materials enjoyable for the students (Huda 2012: p. 44). Choudhury (2001) thinks that language teaching without the help of literature is doomed to be unattractive and, therefore, ineffective. Literature serves as stimulus to language use. A poetry lesson, for example, can involve students emotionally and prove enjoyable. So a portion of our syllabus can comprise some pieces of literature. (cited in Huda 2012: 44)

The Potential Value of Using Literary Texts in Language Teaching

Literature is seen as a medium for the students to develop their appreciation of different language systems. Moreover, studying literature can foster the students' interpretations add enhance their language and communication skills. Literature is inherently authentic and provides authentic input for language learning (Ghosen 2002; Shrestha 2008; cited in Khatib, Ranjbar and Fathi 2012:p.13). The idea of using literary texts in EFL classroom is supported by Mortimer J. Adlert and Charles Van Doren (1972) who claim that literature is valuable authentic material which offers "authentic" samples of language - for example, travel timetables, city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertisements, and newspaper or magazine articles. Learners are thus "exposed to language that is as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom context." At least, literature can bring us a great deal of cultural information. Adlert and Doren also claim the vital role of literature in cultural enrichment and linguistic enrichment. However, these two authors stress upon the personal involvement that literature fosters in readers. Personal involvement can be understood as the readers' close contact with the characters or the engagement in the event of the story, the sharing of emotions and feelings between readers and characters, between readers and the author, and among readers themselves. Therefore, students would have a chance to learn through literary texts in the classroom and then improve their language awareness and cultural understanding. Also, they would be motivated in their learning process when they find themselves capable of giving their emotional responses. Personally, it would be most advantageous when using literary texts in teaching language, especially if the lessons are well planned and if teachers are skilled enough to monitor the class in an interesting and effective way.(cited in Thom 2008:p.120-121)

Selecting Literature

The effective use of literature in the ELT depends on the appropriate selection of literary texts. Literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, it is important to select themes with which the students can identify. Certainly, one common experience of most ESL students is their struggle with a language and culture with which they are unfamiliar. Thus, literature which deals with either of these themes should be highly relevant to them.(cited in McKay 1982, p.531-532) Text selection is a 'crucial factor' (Maley, 2001: 184) in making literature a resource for linguistic development, personal enrichment and cultural appreciation. McRae (1997) also says that "careful text selection is fundamental

to the successful use of any kind of representational materials" (1997:49). Collie and Slater (1994) suggest that text selection depend on "each particular group of students, their needs, interests, cultural background and language level" (1994: 6). Robert Hill (1995) demonstrates two sets of criteria in his essay. Lazar (1993:52) also talks about some criteria. Combined criteria from all the sources mentioned above are formulated in the following section:

- The student's cultural background,
- The student's linguistic proficiency ,
- The student's literacy background,
- The student's age and level of understanding.
- Interesting texts,
- Availability and suitability of the text.

Motivation

Literary texts are very much motivating due to its authenticity and the meaningful context it provides (Ghosen 2002;Van 2009;cited in Khatib 2011:p.202).Due to its authenticity, literature can develop sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge as manifested communicative competence models (Mackay,2001;cited in Khatib 2011:p.202).Sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence are two of the main components of the communicative competence models. Hence, special attention is needed to be directed to this component. Literature due to its authenticity is equipped with sociolinguistic and pragmatic information. These two features are more related to 'appropriateness' in language which can be found only in contextualized language such as literary texts, dramas and plays.

Grammar and Vocabulary Knowledge

Literature is replete with various vocabularies, sentence patterns, words-order and grammatical items which help the learners to learn the target language. Literature is also a good resource for increasing word power. In other words, literature involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose (Van 2009; cited in Khatib 2011:p.202).Also Arther (1968), believes that syntactic knowledge and vocabulary enrichment can be accelerated through literary texts.(cited in Khatib 2011:p.202).Reading short stories and novels can expand vocabulary Knowledge of the learners. For example, Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is a novel with so many new words and it can be prescribed for intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners.

Language Skills Development

Literature can be a great potential resource in teaching language and communications skills, specially speaking skills for the language learners. Belcher and Hirvella (2000) hold that literature is rich with innumerable authentic tokens of language for the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (Crain,1993; Fitzgerald,1993; Nasr,2001, Spack,1985; Stern,2001; vandrick,1996; cited in Khatib 2011:p.203). Sandra Mackay also argues that "literature can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and International Journal of African and Asian Studies - An Open Access International Journal Vol.5 2014 64 use level." To the extent that the students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. It may also enhance students' understanding of a

foreign culture and perhaps "spur their own creation of imaginative works." (cited in Thom 2008:p.120) For writing purposes, literature shows to set a good ground for writing practice. Having the learners complete a poem or short story in close form is very interesting. Also we can have the students write the end of a story in their own words or narrate a story, novella, or novel. Other similar creative activities can be developed for writing practice. For speaking purposes, the events in a poem, novel, or short story can be associated with the learners' own experience in real life. Such a practice paves the way for hot topics for discussion in language classes. Having the students freely reflect on the events and having them critically comment is also facilitative for advancing speaking proficiency. For listening purposes, the learners can be exposed to the audio version of the poems, short stories, or novels. Also the musical elements in poetry stimulate the learners' desire for approximating their speaking patterns to the native speaker norms by adhering to the principles of rhythm, rhyme, and intonation. For reading purposes, as above mentioned; novel and poetry can provide good opportunities for extensive and intensive reading. Also it is good for practicing reading sub-skills including skimming, scanning, finding the main ideas. Reading in literature is a combination of reading for enjoyment and reading for information. Therefore, it bridges the lacks in non-literary texts. In fact, literature is not only facilitative for language learning purposes in general but it can also accelerate language learning in content-based instruction (Shang, 2006; cited in Khatib 2011:p.202). Oppositions and Its Resistances If the most common oppositions to the teaching of literature in language classrooms are considered, we might find further support to our case. Based on Lazar's (1993) research, I will discuss some of them: "I've got a very demanding syllabus to get through, so there's no real time for playing around with poetry in my lessons. Time is a question of priority. Therefore literature here is not relevant. This argument shows clearly the teacher's attitude. Literature is an adjunct because the teacher has not realized its full potential. Playing is an adequate word to refer to it, but not playing around. I see playing as manipulating, creating new forms of expressions, enjoying the experience. What this teacher needs is theoretical support that will reveal how relevant literature can be to language learning. "My students don't read poetry in their own language, so how can they possibly read it in English?" One argument does not necessarily follow the other. Training in native literature is not a requirement for reading works in a foreign language. "It's alright to use poetry with students who intend to study literature further when they leave school. But reading poetry is too specialized an activity for most students, isn't it?" Any change requires some effort and the teacher should be convinced of the benefits of using literary texts so as to commit himself or herself to the process of change. Reading literature is not too specialized but it does require training. "I've tried using a poem with students, but they found it difficult to understand and just wanted me to give them the 'right' interpretation of what it meant." The issue here is not with what to teach but how to do it. If one approach is not successful, other ways should be tried. These students are used to teacher-centered methodologies in which they expect the teacher to provide the answer. Moreover, they must be exposed to a situation where there are no 'right' or 'wrong'

answers, as in the case of literary texts. In literature what counts is the adequacy of an interpretation. "I sometimes wonder if I've really understood the meaning of a poem myself--it's a bit daunting then to explain it to a group of students." Teaching literature requires training. Perhaps the teacher has not been sensitized. Meaning is something the reader builds in the process of reading. Any interpretation which can find justification in the text is acceptable. Perhaps the teacher is right and the text is really too difficult in the sense that the reader lacks enough shared knowledge to make sense. Either the language is too distant (as in metaphysical poetry) or too many extra textual references are assumed. When this occurs, the text should simply not be brought to class. The teacher can always check how appropriate the text is to his or her students. Then, we come to the question of explaining: as far as literature is concerned, students should be encouraged to see, to find out for themselves. This is the only way different interpretations may be brought to class. The teacher should be flexible enough to accept different interpretations. "If poetry's deviant language, what's the point of using it with language learners? They want to know what's right, not what's wrong." This statement deals with a complex issue. Two arguments can be built against this statement. The first holds International Journal of African and Asian Studies - An Open Access International Journal Vol.5 2014 65 that in order to understand some item as deviant, one must concede that there is a system of rules to which one must conform. Whatever deviates from this system of rules is strange, unusual, irregular, etc. If the notion of deviancy is accepted, it may in fact be held against itself: To produce deviant forms, one must know the rules. So, in fact, language learning is being reinforced. In being conscious of the construction of 'deviant' expressions we are working with limits of the possible along with what is impossible.(cited in Zyngier 1994:p.10-11). I would like to stress that the integration of language and literature can work on different levels and for different objectives. At university level, the integration may be very helpful as an introductory course to literary studies where students are trained to be more independent critics who can arrive at an interpretation in a principled way. Many of the objections raised by language teachers lose their strength when literature is understood as an important manifestation of imagination and creativity, where there is no right or wrong, where human logic is challenged and pushed to limits, where cultures and ideologies are checked and compared, where a language system is not taken for granted. This is why I claim that literary texts are essential to language learning. What are open to discussion are which texts to use and how to handle them. Ultimately what happens in the space and time of a classroom depends on the teacher/student interaction. Therefore, it is up to each individual teacher to help promote the integration between language and literature.

2. Conclusion

Though there is a few limitations, literature is viewed as a rich resource for language learning. For many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. In other words, literature is used to 'put

students in touch with some of the more subtle and varied creative uses of language' (Carter &Long, 1991, p. 2, cited in Zingier 1994:p.9). Our success in using literature, of course, greatly depends upon a selection of texts which will not be overly difficult on either a linguistic or conceptual level. Ultimately, however, if learners wish to promote truly aesthetic reading and learning, it is essential to accept literature in a manner which establishes a personal and aesthetic interaction of learner and a text. Therefore, Literature is a new material in teaching and learning communicative competence of the language. In the literature-based classroom, literature can be the primary material of teaching the target language, providing authentic and real contexts of communicative situations. It also provides the pleasure of learning a new language with and through interesting stories. Students can extend their knowledge and experience of the world by reading literature. The language teacher should encourage students to read literature for their own meanings and experiences instead of being forced to accept the teacher's perception of the text literature provided examples of effective and appropriate usage of the language for the students to learn. Literature also shows students new ways to view the world around them by constructing meaning from the text. Literature indeed has a strong place in the ESL curriculum and teaching language. In this light, literature is regarded as a beneficial medium in language teaching.

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