

Teaching Writing Skill through English Literature: Palestine as an Example

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Abstract: *This paper constitutes a relatively new area that has emerged from the relation between writing skills and literature. Admittedly, it is often believed that literature is rich in linguistic knowledge and has been proved as a good source of well-developed structure. Namely that English teachers nowadays are concerned about their teaching style; thus, they are seeking new ways to teach the writing skill effectively, one of which is using literature to improve students' writing skills. Therefore, this study tries to find out the effectiveness of literature as a tool in improving the writing skill for students at primary levels. To achieve this aim, the researcher interviewed (20) male and female teachers who are selected semi-randomly from public schools in Palestine; West Bank and Gaza Strip. In this respect, the present paper explores teachers' opinions regarding using literature as a tool to improve students' writing skills. Results showed that teachers should invest more time and effort to make the best use of literature. Based on the results, the researcher recommended doing an experimental study between two groups to explore to what extent literature helps students in learning language skills.*

Keywords: Teaching literature; teaching writing skills; language skills; and ESL classrooms

1. Introduction

The use of literature in ESL classrooms can wax and wane students' linguistic skills in the target language. There are growing appeals to understand teachers' points of view regarding the integration between literature and writing skill.

When learners read literature, they fling into it. They dive deeper to learn the meaning of the lexical items of the text. This can lead to beneficial effects in learning the language. As such, literature becomes a source of grammar and linguistic rules.

English teachers in Palestine are looking for new ideas to create their independent teaching. However, choosing the appropriate literature for students is the first step into successful teaching. Accordingly, to facilitate the learning process for teachers and students, The Palestinian Ministry of Education provided the public schools textbooks that are backed with an anthology to enhance students' English skills such as writing and reading and to inspire them to read deeply and widely.

Although some researchers have drawn the limits of literature in practice; nevertheless, school teachers are always trying to create their independent way of teaching. Every successful teacher tries to take the advantage of an opportunity to use literature as a powerful tool to stir up students' curiosity to ask questions, find answers, and learn the language skills whether directly or indirectly. The good English teacher is aware of this goal. Therefore, they try to engage students with anthology to create such a creative situation that leads them to improve their skills.

When the teacher uses anthology in the classroom such as short stories, plays, novels, etc., it can attract students' interests to learn the SL effectively. The student is implicitly learning how to develop a well-organized structure. This to

say that while a student is reading or seeking an answer in a novel they pass by commas, full stops, tenses, and other grammar rules; these syntactic rules help them either directly or indirectly to enhance their linguistic knowledge and writing skills.

The writing skill is one of the four basic skills and the most challenging one that learners usually complain about during the learning process. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of literature in improving students' writing skills in ESL classrooms as perceived by teachers.

To enrich the quality of this paper, the researcher is going to examine the challenges that are experienced by ESL teachers when using literature as a tool so remedies can emerge from the study for ESL teachers. Besides, this paper will also uncover the truth of whether English teachers already use literature or not as a tool to improve the students' writing skills.

2. Purpose of the Study

The discussion about using English literature as a tool to enhance students' writing skills is a controversial topic among scholars. Researchers think that literature and writing are closely interrelated. Literature is rich in linguistics knowledge and helps the learner to stimulate their writing maturity. Based on this fact, the key interest of this paper is to understand such relation and how it operates during the learning process.

Henceforth, the researcher is going to explore this correlation from teachers' perspectives and highlight the validity of literature as a tool to improve students' writing skills. Furthermore, to enrich the outcomes of this study, the researcher sets sub-aims. These sub-aims are a) as the

Palestinian curriculum is new¹, this research will assert the urgent need of using literature in classrooms b) to analyse the challenges experienced by ESL teachers while using literature as a tool to teach the writing skill to students in ESL classrooms c) to pinpoint the importance of literature in teaching from teachers' perspectives d) and to explore whether the English teachers depend on literature in their teaching the writing skill or not.

3. Methodology

In this section, the researcher presents an overview of the sample, study method, and a clear description of the procedure.

Sample of the study

The study sample consists of English teachers who are employed at different public Palestinian schools in the current academic year (2020/2021) in West Bank and Gaza Strip. The sample consists of (20) male and female teachers who are selected semi-randomly and a semi-structured phone interview will be employed to serve the purposes of the study.

Procedure and the study method

Each member of the sample has been asked (8) open-ended questions individually and interviewed by the researcher via the phone. The researcher took the permit from the school's principal to conduct the interviews. The phone interview is a convenient tool for this study because the researcher is currently in India and it is not possible to travel to Palestine during COVID -19 closures.

4. Literature Review

The researcher in this section provides a brief idea about using literature in the classroom as a tool to teach the writing skill.

The literature review in this topic shows that literature and language skills are interrelated. Frank (1995) in their study found that literature is the best tool to help learners to produce creative writing. Literature, according to Frank, is the best stimulus and encouragement for learners to master the writing skill. Henceforth, Frank in their study advised English teachers to consider literature as fuel for familiarizing students with the written context. Moreover, Frank assures that using literature in the classroom is important for students' improvement in writing skills. Equally important, Frank indicated that literature can create successful and creative writers. Finally, Frank concluded that if teachers use literature professionally in the classroom, it can be considered as an authentic backup to develop students' writing skills. By the same token, Sapkota (2012) emphasized that literature is a powerful tool to use in the classroom.

¹The Jordanian curriculum is used to be the official English textbook in Palestine till 2000. Since 2001, the Palestinian Curriculum Developing Centre, level by level, replaced the Jordanian curriculum with the new the Palestinian curriculum. By 2006, all levels have been using the Palestinian curriculum till present time.

The majority of prior research has come up with similar conclusions. Slater in Hismanoglu (2005) stated that many convincing reasons lead teachers to use literature in their teaching. One of which is built on a known fact that says "literature as a language enrichment".

The discussion among scholars about literature stimulates the researcher to conduct this study. Some scholars have given a further explanation of graphic literature. For example, a comprehensive description can be found in Mannin's (2010) study. Mannin thinks that teachers should use graphic short stories in teaching the writing skill for its multi-benefit facets. It was also reported by Benegas (2010) that the reader likes graphic novels because it gives more enthusiasm in reading. The study of Benegas also highlighted that using literature in the classroom helps students to grow their maturity in writing. Moreover, the same study added that literature gives students the chance to experience multi-level reading; however, it helps them to enhance their writing as well as their reading skills. On the other hand, Brodsky (n.d) advised teachers to be super careful in the graphics they choose for their students in terms of lengths and structure difficulty.

Overtime, extensive research has been done on the relationship between writing and literature. For example, a study done by Hoque (2007) found that many proficient writers were affected by the anthology they read such as short stories, novels, and poems. Morley, McCormich (2007) in their study stated that there are many pieces of evidence show that the impact of the material they read can affect students' language level.

There seems to be an opinion that literature has received less attention from teachers in terms of practice. Ferradas(2009) proved in their study that literature "has little practical application, is often closely connected with a specific cultural context, and it can idiosyncratic, even subversive". Of course, it is commonly believed that literature is connected only with culture and cannot be used to enhance other language skills. Conversely, other believers along with Frank stated that literature is a rich source of material for teachers.

Early studies come up with similar conclusions. A study completed by Wessel(1987: 85) revealed that literature can improve students' writing skills. If English teachers use literature creatively in the classroom, students can be creative writers. Henceforth, English teacher ought to create writing activities such as asking students to write dialogue then act it before their classmates. As a result, it is rational to relate between literature and creative writing because when learners try to imitate a novel that they read once in terms of style, organization, and content this will lead them to be creative writers.

In accordance with this, Drama, for example, has been proved to be cultural and language enrichment. This belief is built on the fact that drama presents the language in a way that makes it unforgettable. (Wassel: 53-54)

By the same token, this research goes hand in hand with an impressive study completed by Obediat (1999).Obediat

indicated that literature helps students not only in writing but also to speak English fluently, learn how the English linguistic is built, as well as to be critical and creative thinkers. Moreover, Obediat added that literature helps native and non-native learners alike in acquiring the language.

When the writing skill is taught through literature it makes students creative. Students undoubtedly develop their writing skills faster and literature can influence their attitudes towards English language learning and deepen their understanding of language elements such as allusion, ambiguity, well-developed structure, and so on.

5. Discussion

This study aims at investigating the role of literature in improving students' writing skills in ESL classrooms from teachers' perspectives. This section also will answer the sub-aims of the study (see section I). In the following paragraphs are the answers of English teachers.

1) What is the importance of literature from your point of view as a tool to improve writing skills?

The researcher starts with a question that serves the main aim of the study. English teachers agreed among themselves that literature is important in teaching writing skills. They believed that literature makes students motivated to unfold the events and gives them the passion to read. Henceforth, while students are reading, they are also learning vocabulary and pass by interesting techniques of description that will implicitly help them to improve their writing skills. Besides, five participants of the sample said that using literature is important because it helps teachers to employ the top-down approach while teaching. Furthermore, seven participants indicated that some of their students try to imitate the writing style of a novel that they read. Students in this case are trying to create their style in writing. Equally important, the structure of novels and short stories is well-developed and free of grammatical mistakes. So, English teachers considered literature as a safe source for students to enrich their writing level.

2) Do you use literature as a tool in teaching the writing skill? If yes, explain how it can be employed.

The researcher aims from this question to discover the truth about whether English teachers already use literature as a tool to teach writing skills or not in the classroom. Ten participants said that they do not use literature in teaching writing. They claimed that they face many difficulties such as a) the school library is poor of literature books b) low English level of students as well as students' low motivation to learn the target language c) and unavailability of appropriate materials and equipment. However, the other participants of the sample said that they use literature despite the poor environment. They added that the progress is slow but by time, students are getting used to this way in learning the writing skill.

A closer look on the employment of literature in the classroom shows a variety of methods. For example, some teachers ask students to do some tasks that aim at developing the writing skill. One teacher said "I ask my

students to pinpoint all capital letters in the text, then I discuss with them rules regarding the usage of capital and small letters. Other teachers use literature for dictation purposes. They claim that when a student memorizes a well-developed structure for a dictation exam, it can help them effectively once they write in the future. Moreover, there seems a common opinion among teachers that students are learning rules of the language implicitly while reading literature because they pass by correct grammar, sentence structure, and well-developed paragraph. Admittedly, teachers agreed among themselves on the fact that students are not ready for this method because of their low English knowledge, motivation, and poor material. At some point, teachers think that students are not able to understand the text that they read due to their poor vocabulary knowledge; henceforth, they cannot develop their writing skills.

3) How can literature help students to understand the structure of sentences and write error-free essays?

This question aims to understand teachers' opinions on what extant literature can help students in terms of learning sentence structure and writing error-free essays.

Teachers have a common belief among them that literature is rich in structure regardless it is a simple or complex structure. Students can pass by all types of the structure while reading the given texts so when students write they can remember the structure that they passed by while reading and use it effectively.

Seven participants said that most of their students use only present simple in their writing as same as a new car driver who drives on the first gear. Most of the teachers agreed that literature can help students to use complex structures by using phrases and clauses so students' writing becomes more interesting and clearer to the reader.

Ultimately, teachers strongly believe that when students read the literature they can understand the framework so they can write clearly and their sentences flow logically.

4) How does literature improve autonomous learning?

The autonomous learning has come up to the table of discussion among scholars around the word regarding teaching a foreign language. Autonomous learning can be best defined as shifting the focus from teaching to learning. It changes the role of the traditional role of teachers, so they become the source of information and support for students.

Literature can move the autonomous learning when they engage the students with the material. The teacher can identify what can attract students in the literature (i.e. poetry, short story, novel, and so on) then they can recommend students extra similar material to engage them with it. The teacher can create a golden opportunity for every student to control their learning. In addition, the teacher can suggest that studying literature is a social activity, and then students can socialize their learning with their classmates. Most teachers suggested that a good teacher can help students to recognize the advantages of learning with their classmates and having discussions with them about the literature they study.

5) Throughout your journey as an English teacher, do you think students' writing skills can be improved effectively by literature?

This question aims at understanding the future of using literature as a tool to teach writing skills. Also, to express the breadth of teachers' current knowledge-base, including gaps.

Teachers believe that literature can be used efficiently when some points are considered by three parties. These parties are the Ministry of Education, the school, and the teachers themselves. The ministry should offer material for students that is interesting and suitable to their level. Besides, the school should be equipped with the necessary educational environment, such as a lab equipped with computers and laptops along with projectors for the classroom. In addition to the foregoing, teachers should develop their skills and abilities in terms of teaching writing to students through literature. This can be done effectively by taking appropriate courses or developing a new teaching style of their own. Teachers believed that if these elements are taken into consideration, then English literature can be considered efficient in developing students' skills in writing.

6) What are the results of using literature as a tool in teaching writing skills?

This question aims at understanding the main and sub-results of using literature in teaching the writing skill.

Most of the teachers think that students can enrich their linguistic skills unconsciously. When students act a play or recite a poem in front of their mates, it can impact certain dilemmas as well as some structure that they can employ in their writing. Moreover, literary texts encourage students to develop not only the reading and writing skills but also speaking and listening. Furthermore, students can carry their interest in literature outside the classroom and continue reading at home, and at some point, they might be interested to start their writing journey. Few of the sample said that drama texts help students to develop their speaking and writing skills at the same time; this can be done when the teacher asks two students to act a section of the story so they go to write their role down and then speak it in front of the class. Two participants of the sample said that literature help students to get used to ambiguous texts; henceforth, they can develop their writing ability and create a high-level quality of essay writing.

7) What kind of problems do you face while teaching literature in your classroom?

Literature is not taught as a subject itself at the Palestinian schools. It is attached to the English curriculum as supplementary material. This makes teaching literature a real problem for both students and teachers. Students are not ready to solve the challenges of learning anthology because of their low motivation and language skills.

Four participants said that they lack the suitable methods for teaching literature to their students. Most of the teachers find it difficult to spend more time on literature in general because of the long material that they already have to finish in the semester.

Students' linguistic skills are poor to get used of advanced developed structure. Accordingly, teachers find it literature a slow tool to teach writing skills for students.

Based on the foregoing, literature is challenging as well as difficult skill to be taught in the classroom. Students need much more time to read extensively to understand the structure and style of literary texts.

8) What is the role of the teacher in teaching literature to improve writing skills?

Teachers agreed among themselves that they should continue to encourage students to read literature inside and outside the classroom. The teacher should understand students' interest in their favourite type of literature (i.e. novels, short stories, poems, drama, fiction, and so on) and recommend them some extra material to read at home. Besides, teachers at some point can gain the confidence to teach writing through literature if they prepare the material well before teaching it in the class. Moreover, the teacher should link reading literature material by gaining extra marks on their exams. If teachers invest enough time and energy, they will lead students to produce better writing texts and create creative writers.

6. Conclusion

Based on the discussion with English teachers, many conclusions can be drawn. Teachers should understand that writing skills can be taught to students not only traditionally but also using other techniques. Besides, literature is rich in linguistic rules that students can learn unconsciously while reading it. Besides, the teacher should invest more time and effort to make the best use of literature inside and outside the classroom. For instance, literature does not only help students to develop their reading skills but also other language skills such as writing and speaking. Furthermore, the ministry of education should offer a type of literature in accordance to students' needs in terms of their age, language level, and interest. In essence, to enhance the language proficiency for students, the teacher should have a creative style of teaching so students get more benefit in many facets from the given material.

7. Further Research

The researcher suggests carrying out more research on using literature as a tool in teaching writing skills. A student survey could be suggested to investigate the real benefits they get from reading literature. Also, the researcher suggests an experimental study between two groups to explore to what extent literature helps students in language skills. Besides, it would be valuable results if a piece of research investigates the problems that students face in English literature teaching from students' point of view.

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