

## Does Literature Help in Teaching Language?

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**Abstract:** In many non-English speaking countries, literature offers many benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge. It may increase student's motivation to interact with a text and increase their reading proficiency. More importantly, an examination of a foreign culture through literature may increase their understanding of that culture and perhaps motivate their own creation of imaginative works. This paper tries to examine the intricacies involved in learning language through literature, inquire whether literature may have a relevant place in the ESL curriculum. It also takes a fleeting glance at the researcher's own experiences while teaching in the classroom. Literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. However, the success, in using literature greatly depends on the selection of texts which will not be difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level.

**Keywords:** language, literature, EFL/ESL curriculum.

Present day literary texts generally assume that literature can provide great benefits to extend language usage, the most common among them being vocabulary expansion. During these days of professional/occupational efficiency, more stress is being put on teaching English for Special Purposes. It is argued that this is needed for the understanding of scientific or technical vocabulary specific to different subjects of interest to the learners. From this point of view both supportive and negative arguments are put forward to support language teaching through literature.

**Literature Review:** In recent years, the role of literature as a basic component and source of authentic texts of the language curriculum rather than an ultimate aim of English instruction has been gaining more popularity. There has been an on-going debate among language educators, as to how, when, where, and why literature should be incorporated in ESL / EFL curriculum. Discussions have followed on how literature and ESL / EFL instruction can work together and interact for the benefit of students and teachers. There is a difference of opinion, however, among the language educators, who give their own arguments for and against this proposition. Sandra Mc Kay (1982: 529), who presents the pros and cons of using literature to teach language, examines the common arguments against using literature to teach language. The first is that since one of our main goals as ESL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language; literature, due to its cultural complexity does little to contribute to this goal. Another argument is that study of literature will contribute nothing in helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. A third argument is that since literature often reflects a certain cultural perspective, so on a conceptual level it may often be quite difficult for ESL students. These are some of

the issues that have to be addressed before we decide to use literature to teach ESL students with a fair parameter of success. Many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern (Sage 1987:1). While assuming that literature can provide a basis for extending language usage, many of the present day literary texts focus on the particular grammatical points that are salient in the text (as shown by Fassler and Lay 1979). Also, vocabulary expansion is achieved by attention to word forms and common expressions. In summarizing the aims of using literature in ESL classes, an argument put forward is 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" Povey (1972:187). It is opined that literature has traditionally been used to teach language usage, but rarely to develop language use. Yet, it can be ideal for developing an awareness of language use. Hence using literature as genuine and authentic material, as a good language source and as a bridge to get the learner interested can be reflected upon while teaching ESL/EFL students. "Literature is one of the best tools to master a language. People have an inherent ability to understand the basic story-telling conventions irrespective of age, religion, caste and creed. This helps us enjoy literature and appreciate the meaning it conveys. It is this implicit competence that we try to take advantage of in using literature to teach language" (Sakhivel&Kavidha, 2010).

If literature can foster an overall increase in reading proficiency, it will certainly contribute to the goals mentioned above. Reading necessitates the ability to interact with a text by decoding the language and comprehending the concepts presented. Furthermore, these two levels often interact. Sanders McKay (1982:530) cites the example of Johnson (1981), who, in examining the effects of the linguistic complexity and the cultural background of a text on the reading comprehension of Iranian ESL students, found that the relationship between these variables is complex; in some instances familiarity with the text made it easier for students to deal with complex syntactic structures, but this familiarity also resulted in students' going beyond the text in interpreting it. What is critical in selecting a text is to examine it for both its linguistic and conceptual difficulty. What is more important is how the reader interacts with a particular text. If a reader is willing to interact with a given text then the motivational factors involved in reading become critical. Literature is authentic material that makes students travel (although imaginatively at times) to foreign countries and fantastic worlds. This keeps our students motivated and promotes favourable attitude toward learning. As Gaies (1979:48) suggests, "since the reading process ... is the interaction of a reader and a text, we stand in equal need of more research on the affective, attitudinal and experiential variables which would differentiate individual or groups of learners in terms of their willingness and ability to decode written input in a second language." Based on some practical work by various researchers it can be easily noticed that literature can and does produce more tolerance for cultural differences. For example, Marshall (1979:333), in using English

literature with Puerto Rican students, found that as she worked to help students overcome the difficulties of the text, her own appreciation of the text was clarified and her respect for the students' own cultural framework enhanced. Summarizing this benefit of literature Northrop Frye (1964:77) writes: "So you may ask what is the use of studying the world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good. One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance." Another benefit of struggling with the potential cultural problem of literature is that it may promote the students' own creativity. "It is clear that the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the students" (Frye, 1964:129). For great skill and effectiveness, literature is necessary for language learning. W.R. Lee in his editorial in the journal *English Language Teaching* says, "... Literature is rooted, so far as the foreign-language learner is concerned, in the oral basis of language learning; rooted in lively and meaningful oral drills, in spoken and acted dialogues, in simple dramatization of stories; indeed in those very procedures which make for successful and interested learning of the language." (p.4)

In the light of the above observation, Dr. Qareeballah Hajoo Hamdoun and Dr. Syed Sarwar Hussain's paper "Teaching Language through Literature: A diagnostic study on the teaching of English as a Foreign Language" have made an interesting observation, of how a child listens to the nursery rhymes and learns the vocabulary through oral drills instead of the tedious practice of turning over the pages of a dictionary of usages. When a child in his primary years of learning English in a classroom listens to his English teacher reciting the nursery rhyme 'Twinkle, twinkle little star, and is told about the star and the sky, the rest of the words enter his receptive cognition and suggest the intended meaning of the lines. The words 'twinkle,' 'wonder', and 'diamond' render their meanings clear when he conjures up the image of the star in the sky. Therefore, literature offers many benefits to students in ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use level. It may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. Finally, an examination of a foreign culture through literature may increase their understanding of that culture and perhaps motivate their own creation of imaginative works. According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement.

**Selection of Material:** While selecting a text for the student, one has to keep in mind that it must match the interests of the students, as well as be comprehensible to them. A text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits. One obvious solution is to select texts which are relatively easy to read. However, this may have its own disadvantage; as such selections typically are based on some measure of vocabulary difficulty and some indices of syntactic complexity, such as sentence length. Another way is to select texts from

books written for young adults. Such literature, according to Donelson and Nilsen (1980:14-15), tends to have the following characteristics. Frequently, the theme of such literature deals with the problem of personal growth and development. Furthermore, most literature for young adults tends to be relatively short, and the characters usually limited to a small cast with a young adult as the central character. Most importantly, from an ESL perspective, many of the books tend to be stylistically less complex. Apart from selecting literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, it is important to select themes with which the students can identify. Most ESL students are struggling with a language and culture with which they are unfamiliar. Identifiable themes will be better for them from the association and recognition point of view going neck to neck with their level of comprehension. Thus, literature which deals with either of these themes should be highly relevant and helpful to them. Literature can bring us a great deal of cultural information. Adlert and Doren share the same viewpoint with MacKay when claiming 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. It is important that students understand the cultural assumptions that are present in the literary text. Allen (1975:111) puts it in the following words: "Literature is a facet of a culture. Its significance can be best understood in terms of its culture, and its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted."

**Classroom Experience:** While teaching English as a foreign language I felt that the first thing to take care of is to select the material from literature that will be in tune with the achieved standard of the learners. Social context is essential as the young learners tend to identify with and recognize the culture they are familiar with. This awareness of the social context can be had from the world of literature which depicts society in a language as varied as it is authentic and natural. Here the learner encounters the real world outside the classrooms. Hence including communicative narratives, short stories, dialogues, conversations in the curriculum is beneficial. These literary texts helped me to get acquainted with language use. Simultaneously it developed my own competence to understand language as a social phenomenon. While engaging learners with literary specimen I also found that I could use the classroom as a stage to give practice of the communicative language. It was very interesting to see that when we provide students with literature containing familiar cultural background in the beginning they assimilate the text more easily. But the teacher cannot be assured only with familiar material, because diversity will allow them a window to other cultures.

Here more vitality and talent are required, so that the sense of appreciation and wonder are instilled in the learner in equal measure. Hence the formula of selection from diverse writers belonging to different ethnic, social and cultural background lends a colourful hue and helps learners to know about the different life styles of people from various nationalities. Apart from cultural enrichment, literary texts also help in language enrichment. In the process of engaging classes I often got engrossed into discussing the various use of common and uncommon words to the extent of having to engage quite a few more classes for the same lesson to come to an end. This would be followed by more classes in exercises and drills in similar grammatical patterns, to get the learner well versed with the varying patterns. More discussions would ensue on covering the metaphorical usages and other exceptional uses of language thus completing the lesson most fruitfully. I found that while reading a given text learners often felt drawn deep into the story and got involved into it often sharing emotional responses with some of the characters. This has beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process creating an enthusiastic interest in the learner. Hence it is recommended that the selection is made in relation to the needs, expectations and interests of the learners taking care of the language level. I found that teaching language through literature also helped the learners to pick up the four basic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and when they got exposed to the correct way of reading they took even more interest. But all these should be done in integration. Teachers should try to teach the basic language skills as an integral part of the oral and written language use. What has been an activity worth mention is that classroom reading from different texts and follow up like oral and written comprehension exercises based on the readings, vocabulary exercises, and grammar practices: all encouraged group work. Group work helped learners to gain confidence and be motivated to solve different worksheets by discussing the matter with peer group, without the fear of being monitored all the time by their trainer or teacher.

**Conclusion:** The speculations and experiences discussed above lead us to establish some basic criteria for the use of literature in language teaching. A literary piece is not an end in itself but the means of beginning a creative process in the minds and emotions of the student. Literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. The success, of course, in using literature greatly depends on the selection of texts which will not be difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level.

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# Labyrinth

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in honor of **Ms. Sarah Russo**, mother of our dear Albert Russo, Advisory Committee Member, *Labyrinth*. This award is established in memory of Sarah Russo, to commemorate her support of young writers and her love of literature. This wonderful woman left this world on 24 March 2013 to join her loving husband in heaven. The couple had a great admiration for India and its peoples, which they visited several times with always so much pleasure and empathy. Honorable Sarah Russo believed that the Indian people had so much compassion and understanding in the moments of hardship. She always used to enjoy reading *Labyrinth*. The classic Indian film ***Mother India*** was one of her favorite movies, for its sheer humanity, its description of people struggling for life and their solidarity, its magnificent ***Indianness***, and, of course, for its artistic quality.

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