

The Advantages of using Literary Texts in the Language Classroom

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Received: June 14, 2018

Accepted: August 21, 2018

Online Published: September 1, 2018

doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v5i1p118

Abstract: The use of literature was the ultimate goal in the language classroom when the grammar-translation method was popular in language teaching. In the 1960s and 1970s the use of literature in the language classroom lost its prestige because the grammar-translation method fell into disuse. The widespread assumption was that literature was complex hence only linguistically competent learners were able to understand it. However, in the 1970s and 1980s literature emerged as a contributing force in language teaching and since then it has been used in the language classroom to promote language proficiency development. Although its incorporation in language teaching is still a matter of debate today, literature has the potential to foster language learning. Literature is a potentially worthwhile source to help learners with language development, cultural improvement and personal growth. This article explores the benefits of using literature in the language classroom. More specifically, the article focuses on the contributions of literature to language acquisition.

Keywords: Literature, Language, Integration, Language Development

1. Introduction

Carter (1995) defines literature as “a body of written texts, produced by a culture and highly valued within that culture over a period of time” (p.102). Literature is a world of thoughts, feelings, emotions, visions, ideas and beauty (Koutsompou, 2015). The incorporation of literature in the language classroom has always been debated because of its linguistic difficulty. But, for more than two decades literature has been integrated in the language classroom. In order to help language learners make huge leaps in language proficiency development, literature came into prominence since the late 1970s. On the one hand a number of researchers postpone using literature in language learning because they are of the opinion that literary texts cannot be understood unless learners become linguistically competent. On the other hand, several researchers support the inclusion of literature in language learning at all levels for fostering linguistic fluency. Literary texts are authentic materials for that reason they have advantageous over simplified texts. They enable learners to notice different aspects of the language and consequently allow them to make noticeable gains in language development. In other words, language learners become aware of various usage patterns of the target language when they are exposed to literary texts (Mart, 2017). Many researchers support the incorporation of literature in language learning to promote language development, personal growth and cultural enrichment (Maley, 1989; Collie & Slater, 1987; McKay, 1982; Lazar, 1993). This article endeavors to explain the benefits of literature in language learning.

2. Literature Review

Reading has a key role in language acquisition. Bright and McGregor (1970) stress the relationship between reading and language learning and state that “where there is little reading there will be little language learning” (p.52). By means of reading significantly language learners stand a better chance of developing their reading comprehension which helps them with skill and knowledge development (Mart, 2012b). Reading literary texts can create an environment in the language classroom in which language learners are at an advantage to develop language proficiency (Mart, 2017). The incorporation of literature into language learning can provide learners motivational and linguistic development. Literary exposure is also useful in that it fosters learners’ cultural and personal growth.

Literary texts are authentic materials; therefore, provides an opportunity for learners to process real language. In other words, learners deal with language samples in real-life contexts and they become acquainted with different communicative functions and linguistic forms. In other words, the use of content and form should be appropriate for learners to understand better. The language used in simplified texts is natural; thus, it influences learners’ development of language skills negatively. However, literary texts use more connectives for connecting ideas. Halliday (1985) argues that when connectives are frequently used, learners understand the texts with ease. Compared with simplified texts, authentic texts increase language awareness of learners. While learners endeavor to create meaning through processing real examples in literary texts, they notice how language operates in text (Mart, 2018).

Language resources are used skillfully in literary texts; for that reason language learners are exposed to ample amount of comprehensible input when they are engaged in literary texts. Language acquisition entails comprehensible input. The use of literature in the language classroom helps learners develop their language skills, language structure knowledge and reading proficiency (McKay, 1982; Liaw, 2001). Moreover, the introduction of literature in the language classroom is ideal for the development of communication skills. Learners make progress through reading literature significantly. They improve their vocabulary and grammar knowledge which contributes to their mastery of language. Grammatical structures occur in a meaningful context in literary texts (Paesani, 2005). When learners decode the grammatical patterns in the text, they stand a better chance of using them for the development of communicative competence. Literary texts allow teachers to introduce or revise new sentence structures and vocabulary (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). Hsieh (2006) similarly gives importance to the use of literature in language teaching for its benefits on vocabulary, grammar and comprehension development.

Literary texts include multiple interpretations; thus, learners through interacting with texts master the language with ease. It should be borne in mind that interaction forms the basis for communicative approach. The interaction between the reader and the text stimulates the reader to construct meaning. While building meaning, the reader is actively involved in the learning process. The reader shares the meaning with his/her friends and teachers and conveys ideas. This sharing is a good opportunity for the reader to practice the language. The reader becomes motivated and learning occurs.

Poetry, story books, drama and novels are all useful resources to maximize language learning. Poetry is an enjoyable experience which develops learners’ analytical ability. Learners master figures of speech, power of language, and the use of semiotic elements. At the same time, poems include cultural elements

which are not very easy to translate into another language (Sage, 1987). Therefore, poetry plays a significant role in cultural enrichment. Stories compared with other genres are easy; hence, motivates learners to read. Learners develop not only their creativity but also their critical thinking. Stories have universal themes and allow learners to understand others. Language is presented in an authentic and meaningful context. Learners have an opportunity to practice the language and develop their skills (Mart, 2012a). Drama is also a useful resource for language learners to become familiar with the usage of language in context. Learners benefit from drama to promote their language development, enhance creative thinking, and improve cultural growth. As drama reflects social events, learners make use of it to foster their sensitivity and developing new ideas for social problems. In the same vein, novels refer to human lives. The use of novels helps learners to develop insights about different groups of people and cultures. Learners read about problems characters experience in novels and they endeavour to arrive at effective solutions.

The activities conducted in the literature classroom hold an important place in language proficiency development. Pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities stimulate the learners to understand literary texts better, create meaning easily, and practice the language effectively. These activities enable the learners to understand the plot and characters, master the grammatical structures and vocabulary, develop creative thinking, and share their experiences and ideas with others.

The inclusion of literature in language learning has been supported due to the fact that it provides excellent models for learners. As learners are exposed to real examples in literary texts, they become aware of how grammatical structures and vocabulary are connected to each other. This opportunity enables learners to connect knowledge and practice. That learners deal with language features in authentic materials in literary texts enables them to apply the same strategies in their communication.

3. Conclusion

Although the incorporation of literature in language learning has always been debated, it is possible to say that it has a key role in language proficiency development. Literary texts are authentic materials in which real examples are presented to readers. When readers are engaged in literary texts, they are at an advantage to realize how grammatical structures and vocabulary are connected to each other. In other words learners have a chance to see how language operates in text. As learners become aware of how language features function in text, they apply the same strategies in their communication. Moreover, literature has the potential to develop language awareness, language skills, cultural enrichment and personal growth of learners. As long as teachers pay attention to the selection of materials they use in the language classroom, learners benefit from literary texts.

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