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Incorporating Literary Texts in Language Classroom

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Incorporating Literary Texts in Language Classroom

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I. Introduction

Works of literature are read for pleasure. They are studied as a course or discipline in many countries. Literature holds a mirror to the society. It allows a basic understanding of human nature. By reading works of literature of a particular time, the reader gets some general idea of the way that particular society worked. For example, by reading Victorian novels, the reader gets a glimpse of that society, their norms, distinction of social classes, etc. Even the literary works which were written centuries ago, readers can still connect with them as they deal with human emotion, something that has universal appeal. Thus, works of literature can be considered as social, cultural documents that allow a deeper understanding of humanity. Apart from these, literary texts are widely used in language classroom, especially since 1980s, as they are considered as authentic materials that help to motivate and engage learners.

II. Literature Review

Literary texts were not given much priority earlier in the language classroom as the focus was given on the functional use of language. But for last few decades there has been a revival in the use of literary texts in the language classroom. Many critics suggested that literary texts are authentic materials that help to motivate and engage the learners. It was believed that the language of literary texts were much different than regular, everyday language but studies of stylistics "emphasises connections between literary language and everyday language" (Barry, 1995). According to critics Brumfit and Carter (1986) "The literary text is seen as self sufficient as a language artifact". Many critics vehemently support the use of literary text in the language classroom. Critics, such as, Collie and Slater (1987) suggest the use of literature "which speaks to the heart as much as to the mind, provides material with some emotional colour, that can make fuller contact with learner's own life". They suggest that literary texts can be regarded as "valuable authentic material" that can provide "cultural enrichment" and "language enrichment" (1987). Critic Lazar (1993) thinks that a closer integration of language and literature in the classroom helps the students to achieve"their main aim- which is to improve their knowledge of, and proficiency in, English."

a) What is literature?

Before dealing with literary texts, we should know what literature is. According to Cuddon (1977), literature is a term "which usually denotes works which belong to the major genres: epic, drama, lyric, novel, short story, ode, etc". According to Macmillan Online English Dictionary (2009), literature can be termed as "stories, poems, and plays, especially those that are considered to have values as art and not just entertainment."

b) Advantages of Using Literary Texts

Using literature in language classroom has many advantages. As critic Lazar (1993) suggests, while dealing with literary works, learners are exposed to a wide range of authentic materials. It really helps learners to engage in the classroom activity as they feel highly motivated when they are dealing with authentic materials. According to Lazar, "Students are helped to develop a response to literature through examining the linguistic evidence of the text." They use their analytical ability to come up with their own interpretation of the text. They are encouraged to draw on their knowledge of English language and this approach provides useful exposure to grammar, vocabulary in interesting new contexts. Thus students' main aim is fulfilled- to improve their knowledge of the language (1993).

With authentic materials, learners can easily connect with the real world, world outside the classroom. They can apply their classroom experiences in the real world. They also feel a sense of accomplishment when they are dealing with literary texts because generally literary works are considered as

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complex and difficult. In addition to that, in many societies works of literature are given a much higher stature. It is believed that literary works are understood and appreciated by the people of refined sensibility. These also help the learner to feel more motivated and engaged with the text, as well as, the classroom activities.

The language of the literary texts is a bit different from the other texts used in language classroom. Sometimes the rules of grammar and syntax are not strictly followed in them. Usually a more refined and ornamented language is found in literary texts. These enriched and ornamented language enhance learners' language competence; at the same time, they gain familiarity with many features of the target language which they are attempting to master.

Besides the linguistic aspect, literary texts serve another purpose. As literary texts can be considered as socio-cultural and historical documents, through literary texts learners get to learn many things about different societies, their culture, norms, etc. On the other hand, almost every literary text imparts some moral lessons. They allow us to distinguish between right and wrong, show the triumph of virtuous and shed light on basic human behavior. Thus learners gain knowledge about many countries and also receive some moral teaching. These not only help them to enhance their language competence but also help them develop their personality, make them more humane.

For all these reasons, learners find it more interesting and motivating when literary texts are incorporated in language classroom. So, literary texts can be considered as a powerful pedagogical tool to be used in language classroom.

c) Difficulties Faced While Choosing Texts

Despite of its advantages, teachers face much difficulty while choosing a literary text for language classroom. There are many things that the teacher needs to keep in mind while choosing the appropriate text for the class.

The first thing to focus on is the length of the text. The teacher must select a text that can be covered in one or two classes. A four hundred pages' novel, a long poem with ten or even more cantos, a long five acts' play should not be chosen for the language classroom because they are too long and learners will find them overwhelming. So choosing a text with appropriate length is very crucial. It is better to choose a short story, a short poem or a novella for the classroom as they express a message in a very compressed form. In this way, the learners will find the essence of a literary text which they will enjoy and they do not have to spend long time finishing the text. It is also easier from the part of the teacher to design appropriate classroom activities involving a short text.

The Second thing the teacher should keep in mind is not to choose a text that is too difficult and not at par with the learners' competence level. If the teacher needs to provide vocabulary of more than six or seven words, it means the text is too difficult for the learners. Some literary texts, especially Post Modern literary texts, may have used simple words but the meaning of the whole text is intentionally allusive and confusing. So students may not be able to understand such texts properly and will feel de-motivated. So it is better to choose texts with simple vocabulary and easily accessible meaning.

Thirdly, a teacher should not select a text that is written long ago, in archaic language. Learners will find so many words they are not familiar with and find the text incomprehensible. In addition, the text will deal with such situations, norms, values with which the learners may not be able to connect themselves and lose interest in the text. It is better to choose texts that are written in less than two centuries ago. If the teacher wants to deal with old classics, it is better to use a translated or an abridged form of the text.

Lastly, the teacher should choose a text with which the learners can easily connect. If the teacher needs to provide a great deal of background knowledge before starting the text, the student will lose interest. If the society depicted in the text is too remote from the one the learners belong, or if there is a huge cultural gap, then the learners will not be able to connect with the text, and may feel alienated to some extent. So it is better to select a text where a brief social, cultural or historical background will help the learners grasp the context and they are somewhat familiar with the socio-cultural norms of the society depicted in the text.

III. Effective Classroom Activity

Keeping all the above mentioned points in mind, the teacher should choose a text and design some effective classroom activities, focusing on the four language skills. Classroom activities can be classified into many groups. The following classification is recommended by Lazar (1993):

i. Pre- reading activities
ii. While- reading activities
iii. Post- reading activities

The teacher must choose texts and activities, keeping in mind the competence level of the learners. Here, two texts have been selected, one is Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Valentine" and another is Kate Chopin's short story "The Story of an Hour". The texts and activities are suitable for advanced or tertiary level's learners. By following the above mentioned classification, the classroom activities for these two texts(where emphasis is given on all four language skills) are given below.

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a) *Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Valentine"*

i. *Pre- reading activity*

- The teacher can provide a brief biography of Carol Ann Duffy and focus on the issues she usually expresses through her poetry.
- Then, the teacher can ask the students to discuss the title of the poem and come up with their own idea on what kind of poem is it going to be.
- The teacher can play a video of the recitation of the poem (many videos of poem's recitation are available on www.youtube.com, some of them are recited by the poets themselves) and engage the learner with the text before they read it by themselves.

These kinds of activities help learners to understand the background of the text, they feel more engaged with the text and enhances their cognitive ability.

ii. *While- reading activity*

- The learners will read the text thoroughly. They will underline the unknown words that they think are making them unable to understand the complete meaning of the text.
- The teacher can provide a table with the unknown words the students find in the text in the left column. The students will match them with their suitable meaning given in the right column.
- They will encircle the key words which they think are crucial for understanding the plot and the themes of the text.
- They can be divided into small groups, where each group will write a short summary of the text. They will listen to the summaries of other groups and say if the other groups have missed out an important detail or do they want to add something to other group's summary.

These activities help learners to grasp the meaning, the plot and main themes of the text. They get to enrich their vocabulary. As they participate in the interactive classroom activities, it helps them improve their communicative competence.

iii. *Post- reading activity*

- The learners will have to answer some question based on the text that will require them to critically analyze or interpret the text. For example- a. Give your opinion on the idea of love expressed in the poem, give detail to support your opinion.
- The teacher can choose some important lines from the text and ask the learners to explain them.

These activities help learners to engage with the text and lean on to their personal critical or analytical ability. These will not only improve learners' analytical ability but also improve their knowledge of language as they will have to come up with their own explanations. Their responses will help the teacher to understand whether the learners have been able to grasp the basic concepts of the text.

b) *Kate Chopin's short story "The Story of an Hour"*

Sometimes even advanced level's learners find it difficult to understand poetry as they express ideas in a very condensed form. So, the teacher can use short stories in the class instead, as they are comparatively easier than poetry. The classroom activities for Kate Chopin's short story are given below.

i. *Pre- reading activity*

- The teacher can provide a brief historical and social background of the time Kate Chopin wrote the story. The condition of women in such societies can be discussed with the students.
- The teacher can discuss the title of the story. Students will come up with their ideas of the text, based on the title.

ii. *While- reading activity*

- The students will thoroughly read the text and underline the unknown words, words they are not familiar with.
- The students will try to guess the meaning of the unknown words. Later the teacher will provide their meaning, so the students can see whether they were right or wrong.
- The students will be divided into small groups. They will write a short summary or the main themes of the text. Then, each group will share what they have written and other groups will add something to it if necessary.

iii. *Post- reading activity*

- The students will analyze the main characters of the text. As they share their views, others will add something to what they have said, only if they have missed an important detail.
- The students will be asked to write analytical question answers based on the text. For example- A. What do you think is the real cause of Mrs. Mallard's death? B. According to you, how was the marital relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Mallard?

By choosing literary texts that are comprehensible and enjoyable and designing such interactive classroom activities that are at par with students' level of language competence will highly motivate the learners and enhance their language skills immensely.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that literary texts can serve as a great pedagogical tool in language classroom as they are authentic materials that help to motivate and engage learners. If the teacher can keep in mind the competence level of the learners and come up with appropriate literary texts with effective classroom activities, it will help learners to enhance their

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communicative competence and develop their language skills; at the same time, provide them a scope for personal growth and gain knowledge about different cultures and societies.

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