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Literature: An Essential Tool in Language Teaching

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Literature: An Essential Tool in Language Teaching

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Abstract- Literary texts are a rich source of linguistic input that can assist learners practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing in addition to illuminating grammar rules and introducing new vocabulary. Additionally, it has been discovered that literary texts can engage students with various learning styles and offer chances for multisensory classroom experiences. Furthermore, this paper intends to highlight the use of literature as a popular method for teaching both basic language skills and language areas in our times. Reasons for using literary texts in foreign language classroom as well as the main criteria for choosing appropriate literary texts in foreign language classes are stressed to familiarize the reader with the underlying motivations and standards for language teachers when using and selecting literary texts. Also, the relationship between literature and the teaching of language skills, the advantages of various literary genres for language learning, and the difficulties faced by language teachers while teaching English through literature are also taken into consideration.

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I. Introduction

Literature is certainly a great media for teaching and learning language since the language used in literature is exceptionally rich in vocabulary, well-organized and consistent. Literature has not only many functions, but power. According to Kelly (1996), among the key values of (children's) literature are enjoyment, aesthetics, understanding, imagination, information and knowledge, cognition, and language. And this power is recognized by many experts. Additionally, it nourishes readers' creative process by stimulating and stretching their imagination, offering new information, viewpoints, and ideas so that readers can envision the possibilities and elaborate on original ideas. In this way, it expands readers' ability to convey imagination in words and images.

Literary programs not only enhance language abilities, but also promote the development of better reading and writing skills. Also, a variety of grammatical constructions and lexicons are cleverly illustrated and employed in literary texts, which undoubtedly influences students to better comprehend grammar and expand their knowledge of the language, especially English. Further, limiting students' exposure to language resources and grammar rules will likely prevent them from speaking naturally and smoothly because they won't have enough opportunities to develop both their written and spoken communication abilities. Thus, the aim of this paper is to make the point that literature is an important element to deciphering all the codes and secrets of foreign languages and encourages general linguistic awareness among the students while simultaneously improving their ability to communicate in the target language.

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II. Discussion

a) *Review of the Two Approaches to Literary Analysis for Language Teaching*

The field of literary analysis has a long history; various theories exist on how to use it to assess and teach literature and language. The reader-response method and the language- based method are two approaches to literary analysis that are commonly debated for language teaching.

i. *Approach 1: Reader-response*

The major aspects of the reader-response approach include emphasizing the reader's participation and process-oriented approach to reading literature. This allows students to use their own perspectives, ideas, and emotions in interpreting literary works. Dias and Hayhoe (1984) pointed out that "it is precisely the role of the reader in the act of reading that has not been sufficiently and properly addressed." The reader-response approach addresses this problem by involving the students actively in the learning process. Rosenblatt's theory of literary reading, which outlines the transactional relationship between a reader and a literary work, explains the fundamental link between the reader and the text. Events in a literary work occur at a particular time and location, and readers respond to these events in various ways based on their individual interests and experiences. Every reader associates his or her own unique interpretation with a piece of literature. In fact, the reader-response method significantly advances language learning by demystifying literature and relating it to personal experience. Researchers and teachers in the field of language learning support making literature more accessible by engaging students' prior knowledge so they may better predict and decode the language and themes of literary texts. Emotional reactions from reading a story, poem, or play can be harnessed for classroom instruction (Bleich, 1975). Activating students' schemata in reading literature is important and

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personalizing the learning experience boosts engagement and motivation. These are the core principles of CLT that are recognized to promote learning through student-centered and process-oriented activities.

ii. *Approach 2: Language-based Approach*

The language-based approach emphasizes awareness of the language of literature, and it is the fundamental stage for language learners. This approach facilitates students' responses and experience with literature and is considered quite accessible for language learners. The language-based approach also calls for a variety of language instruction activities, such as brainstorming to activate prior knowledge and make predictions, rewriting story endings or summarizing plots, using closed procedures to build vocabulary and comprehension, and incorporating jigsaw reading to enable students to work collaboratively, form opinions, and engage in spirited debates. Thus, literature is a great platform for CLT methods that results in developing language skills through interaction, collaboration, discussion, and collective learning. Apparently, the teacher's role is not to enforce interpretation; rather, to introduce and clarify difficult and technical terms, to prepare and suggest appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene as needed to provide prompts or stimuli. The language-based approach responds to language students' needs in studying literature: They receive the skill and technique to make texts more accessible and develop sensitivity to various genres so they may enjoy a piece of literature that relates to their lives. Moreover, this approach satisfies students' needs in learning a language more effectively; they communicate in English to improve their language competence, develop the necessary skills of working in groups, and become active learners. Most educators believed that the language-based approach is motivating, as it helps students handle a text, enhances their enjoyment and interest in literature, fosters their independence, and improves their learning of English.

b) Reasons for Using Literary Texts in Foreign Language Classes

According to Collie and Slater (1990), 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. In addition to these four main reasons, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are some other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the classroom context.

c) Valuable Authentic Material

Literature is authentic material. Majority of literary works are not written primarily with the intention of teaching a language. Recent course materials provide numerous real-world examples of language usage, such as travel schedules, city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertising, and newspaper or magazine articles. Thus, in a classroom context, learners are exposed to actual language samples of real life/real life like settings. Reading literary texts exposes students to a variety of linguistic forms, communicative functions, and meanings because they also have to deal with language intended for native speakers.

d) Cultural Enrichment

For many language learners, a visit or an extended stay in the nation where the target language is spoken would be the best approach to improve their grasp of verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication is just not feasible. Although a novel, play, or short story takes place in a fictional setting, it nonetheless provides a rich and vivid backdrop in which characters from various socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds can be described. The reader can learn more about how the characters in these literary works perceive the outside world (i.e., their ideas, feelings, habits, traditions, belongings; what they purchase; what they believe in; what they fear; what they love; how they speak and behave in different setting) through visual literacy of semiotics. Employing visual semiotic literacy, this vibrantly produced environment can immediately assist the foreign student in getting a sense of the codes and preoccupations that shape a real culture. Perhaps the best way to think about literature is as a supplement to other resources used to deepen a foreign learner's awareness of the nation whose language is being acquired. Additionally, literature significantly enhances the learners' cultural grammar.

e) Language Enrichment

Learners may encounter a large variety of distinct lexical or syntactic elements in literature. Students become familiar with many features of the written language, reading a substantial and contextualized body of text. They learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their own writing skills. When students start to recognize the range and depth of the language they are attempting to acquire and start utilizing some of that potential themselves, they also become more productive and adventurous. As a result, individuals develop their communication and cultural competency through the real texts' naturalness and richness.

f) Personal Involvement

Literature can aid in language learning since it encourages the reader's personal involvement. After reading a literary work, the learner starts to inhabit it. He becomes absorbed in the text. It becomes less

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important to understand the meanings of lexical terms or phrases than to focus on the story's progression. As the story's conclusion approaches, the student becomes eager to learn what occurs because he feels a connection to certain characters and understands their feelings. The entire process of learning a language may benefit from this. It is clear at this point how important it is to match the students' needs, expectations, and interests with the right literary work. In this process, he can remove the identity crisis and develop into an extrovert. Maley (1989) lists some of the reasons for regarding literature as a potent resource in the language classroom as follows:

1. Universality
2. Non-triviality
3. Personal Relevance
4. Variety
5. Interest
6. Economy and Suggestive Power
7. Ambiguity

1. *Universality*

Because we are all human beings, the themes literature deals with are prevalent across all cultures despite their various approaches of dealing with them-Death, Love, Separation, Belief, Nature etc., the list is familiar. These experiences all happen to human beings.

2. *Non-triviality*

Many of the more familiar forms of language instruction inputs tend to trivialize texts or experience. Literature does not trivialize or talk down. It is about things which mattered to the author at the time he wrote them. It may offer genuine as well as merely "authentic" inputs.

3. *Personal Relevance*

Since it deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which either constitute part of the reader's experience or which they can enter into imaginatively, they are able to relate it to their own lives.

4. *Variety*

Literature encompasses within it all possible varieties of subject matter. In fact, it is a list of subjects for ELT. Within literature, we can find the language of law and of mountaineering, of medicine and of bull-fighting, of church sermons and nursery talk.

5. *Interest*

Literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting, because part of the human experience, and treats them in ways that draw readers' interest.

6. *Economy and Suggestive Power*

One of the great strengths of literature is its evocative power. It urges us to look beyond what is explicitly expressed to what is implied, even in its most basic forms. Literature is excellent for sparking linguistic discussion since it conveys many concepts in few words. A low input can frequently lead to a maximum output.

7. *Ambiguity*

Literature quietly conveys diverse meanings to different people due to its strong suggestive and associative qualities. It is uncommon for two readers to respond to a text in precisely the same way. In teaching, this has two advantages. The first advantage is that each learner's interpretation has validity within limits. The second advantage is that an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed since each person's perception is different. The tension required for a true exchange of ideas is established by the fact that no two readers will have completely similar interpretations.

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons for using literature in the foreign language class, one of the main functions of literature is its sociolinguistic diversity. The use of language varies from one social group to another. Likewise, it changes from one geographical location to another. A person speaks differently in different social contexts like school, hospital, police station and theatre (i.e. formal, informal, casual, frozen, intimate styles speech). The language used changes from one profession to another (i.e. doctors, engineers, economists use different terminology). To put it differently, literature helps students become more proficient in the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language by exposing them to a wide range of linguistic variants, such as sociolects, regional dialects, jargon, and idiolects. Consequently, incorporating literature into a foreign language teaching program as a powerful source for reflecting the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language gains importance.

g) Against Literature in EFL/ESL

Taking into account the advantages of literature in EFL/ESL, there are some researchers who have suggested that there may also be drawbacks. The criticisms made include:

i. *Syntax*

Reading is a challenging endeavor due to the intrinsic syntactic complexity of literary texts. This is one of the primary criticisms of EFL/ESL literature. McKay (1982) and Savvidou (2004) contend that literary texts deviate from the conventions of Standard English standards, and hence can induce problems for language learning purposes. It is argued that literary texts are loaded with complex structures sometimes miles away from Standard English. The irregularity of syntax is particularly evident when it comes to (old) poetry. Poems are typically written in a way that deviates from the norms of speaking or even writing, making it difficult for readers to comprehend them. Bearing all these arguments in mind, we should remember that this complexity itself can serve as a source of practice

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especially for the learners at the intermediate and the above levels. In other words, above intermediate levels should be given syntactic complexity so that it can be used as a tool for language practice.

ii. *Lexis*

Some argue that lexical difficulty of the literary texts adds fuel to the fire. As per Robson (1989) literature is thought to be able to do "little or nothing to help students to become competent users of the target language" due to its syntactic and lexical complexity. Others contend that literary texts are teeming with archaic and outdated vocabulary not practiced in today's English. Words such as "thee and thou" are not normally found in today's English. Again, there is a counterargument that this is only working in old literature such as that of Shakespeare. Teachers are not required to simply use classic literature. There are many contemporary literary works that can be used as a source of inspiration, such as short tales by Hemingway and others that are more closely aligned with Standard English.

iii. *Phonetics and Phonology*

Similarly, some experts believe that literature is filled with instances where there is a deviation from standard phonetic and phonological system. Some words have gone through minor or significant alterations in their pronunciation which may cause misconceptions. Language learners may struggle with these issues. An example is the word 'love' which was pronounced as /lūv/ in old English. Authors do contend that our language learners can find even these variations fascinating, and that eventually making them aware of these phonetic or phonological shifts is instructive.

iv. *Semantics*

The word "gay" is one of many that have undergone semantic modification. For language learners, such shifts in meaning can be problematic. As a result, some experts view this as a weakness in literary texts. However, we also state that these semantic modifications are seen as an addition to the learners' prior knowledge rather than a block to it. As long as they are not impeding language learning, no harm is expectant from these semantic variations. Nevertheless, the primacy of learning these words should be attended to.

v. *Selection of Materials*

It might be challenging for teachers and students to choose literary texts. To ensure that children or young adults are exposed to different types of literary texts than adult learners, teachers should be mindful of characteristics including the learners' age, gender, and background knowledge. When choosing the resources, consideration should also be given to the gender and educational background of the learners. Additionally, factors related to the text itself should be taken into account. For example, is the text old or modern, is it from escape literature or interpretive literature, what is the genre of the work, who is the author, which dominant literary school does the work allude to, is it short or long, and other similar questions. Considering all the aforesaid problems built-in literary texts, Carter & Long (1991) argue that these problems can be overcome by selecting an appropriate text for an appropriate group of language learners.

vi. *Literary Concepts and Notions*

Unfamiliarity with certain literary genres and conventions might also bring about certain sorts of problems (Maley, 1989). An example is exposing the beginners to James Joyce's "Ulysses" which is abundant with stream of consciousness. Lack of familiarity with certain literary elements makes the writings confusing and difficult to comprehend. Eliminating difficult literary canons or introducing these new literary concepts and notions before having the students read the corresponding literary text are two solutions to this challenge. Another is to choose the texts that best fit the learners' existing and potential level of literary understanding.

vii. *Literature and Academic English*

Along with McKay (1987) argument, so many language teachers conclude that literature has little if anything to serve the needs of our learners in academic settings or specialized fields such as biology and zoology where educational goals are given priority over aesthetic values of literary texts. Maley (1989) subsequently emphasizes that this is not always the case because literature can be used as a motivational tool to encourage students to study various text types. Shang (2006) points out that literature can even be integrated in content-based instruction classes. Though literature cannot directly serve ESP/EAP courses' needs, it can be a positive catalyst for quickening language learning process.

viii. *Cultural Barriers*

In view of McKay (1982) claim, we can drive home the fact that literature is saturated with certain cultural concepts which hence makes understanding literature much frustrating. Currently language teachers and materials writers are on the horns of a dilemma about which culture to present, L1 culture or L2 culture. As Tomlinson (2001) maintains there is a need to humanize the textbooks and one way to actualize this want is to localize the textbooks with interesting L1 topics and themes. However, others (Brown, 2007) take side with the other camp and consider language as culture and culture as language where L2 culture is essential for EFL/ESL. With the rise of English as an International Language (EIL), this quandary has become more contentious. However, the authors believe that treating both L1 and L2 culture in a contrastive way will make the differences more elaborate and distinct for the learners. Capitalizing on contrastive cultural studies can

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be very much illuminating for our language classes and hence respect both cultures. McKay (1982) offers three ways to wipe out the problems of linguistic and cultural complexity:

- Using simplified texts, i.e. texts which are simplified for language learning purposes.
- Using easy texts, i.e. texts which are by nature more readable than others and are appropriate to the level of the learners.
- Using young adult texts because they are stylistically less complex.

ix. *Criteria for Selecting Suitable Literary Texts in Foreign Language Classes*

When selecting the literary texts to be utilized in language classes, the language teacher should consider the needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students. However, one important consideration is whether a particular work is able to reveal the kind of personal involvement by arousing the learners' interest and eliciting strong, positive reactions from them. Reading a literary text that is both significant and entertaining is more likely to have a lasting, positive impact on the learners' linguistic and extra linguistic understanding. Choosing books relevant to the real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner is of great importance. Another aspect to consider is language barrier. If the language of the literary work is simple, this may facilitate the comprehensibility of the literary text but is not in itself the most crucial criterion. Interest, appeal, and relevance are also prominent. Enjoyment; a fresh insight into issues felt to be related to the heart of people's concerns; the pleasure of encountering one's own thoughts or situations exemplified clearly in a work of art; the other, equal pleasure of noticing those same thoughts, feelings, emotions, or situations presented by a completely new perspective: All these are motives helping learners to cope with the linguistic obstacles that might be considered too great in less involving material (Collie and Slater, 1990).

III. Conclusion

This paper discussed the significance of literature in EFL/ESL classes. Both advantages and drawbacks of using literature for language teaching and learning purposes have been widely considered. The author of the present paper believes that literature, in spite of some weak points it might have as any language teaching material might possess, provides a stimulating drive for language learning and teaching due to its remarkable elements that are not easily found in other texts. After carefully examining the aforementioned arguments and previous studies, it is plausible to conclude that incorporating literary texts into language classrooms significantly aids students and fosters the process of language learning. In the end, literature helps learners become more creative and critical thinkers while also improving their language skills. Furthermore, literature is the perfect place and platform, where all the linguistic phenomena and grammatical structures are well performed and practiced.

Meanwhile, the significance of bringing literary texts into language classes depends on the criteria for selecting the most appropriate literature and careful evaluation of the students' skills and responses to these literary works. It is crucial for foreign language teachers to carefully consider the literary material they want to include in their syllabus to avoid any eventualities in advance, because the level of the language, in which the literary texts are written, have to be entirely consistent with the students' language abilities, otherwise it would not bring about any improvements and would, instead lead to a chaos and complete waste of time and energy.

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