

CONTRIBUTION OF LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING THE LSRW SKILLS THROUGH THE ELT CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

21st century has heralded revolutionary and novel thought processes with regard to English language learning or teaching. Scores of research scholars and erudite language experts worldwide have come out with various methods and processes of teaching and acquiring English language. Among a plethora of methods, we find an exclusive thought process that erupted recently. It is about the relevance of using English literature in an English language classroom for improving LSRW skills of the students. The primary question is how far the proposition to use English literature in English language classroom justified and commended. We do understand the relevance and importance of English literature but how far is it able to aid language acquisition in the context of teaching English as a second (foreign) language. It is also true that language teaching focuses on teaching speaking and listening, but literature is more about reading and writing. The goal is not to understand a piece of literature, but to use that as a means to achieve the speaking and listening skills primarily. But it is also naive, to undermine the importance of the two skills, reading and writing, for which, literature is a viable tool. The question, then, is: what exactly is to be done with literature in a language teaching context? This paper focuses on understanding the contribution of literature as a means of improving the LSRW skills through the ELT classroom.

Keywords: English literature, language classroom, relevance, skill sets, improving

1. The case against literature

Teachers and lecturers teaching literature sometimes find it difficult to justify their existence professionally. That is akin to what has been called by the literary scholar Elaine Showalter (2002: 1-20) "the anxiety of teaching." Thus, the inclusion of literature in second language (for convenience, "FL") lesson plan is more difficult to justify. This difficulty has some political reasons. For example, in teaching English as a foreign language, the personnel sometimes have the guilt that they are serving a kind of linguistic imperialism, and when they introduce the learners to Ted Hughes, Dickens or Shakespeare, the condemnation comes, for cultural hegemony also (e.g. Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986). Methodologically there are other reasons. "Real life" and "real-life" situations should rather be the context of FL teaching; literature can not at all be seen as "real life", and often, not even realistic, and coming to its relevance to today's contemporary life, it is barely there (see Section 5). There is no denying that the process of teaching a language should primarily aim at teaching the skills of speaking and listening. Though literature is more about the skills of reading and writing, the English teacher shall focus on using literature as a means to nurture and improve the skills of speaking and listening. In no way should one undermine the importance of the skills of reading and writing, for which, literature is a viable tool. The question, then, is: what exactly is to be done with literature in a language teaching context?

2. The case for literature

A welter of reasons for or benefits of, teaching literature in the FL classroom have been offered by a variety of authors. For example, Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000: 9-11) list, with more or less approval, the following ten:

1. Cultural enrichment. Reading literature promotes cultural understanding and awareness. (see also Collie and Slater 1987; Schewe 1998; Sell (ed.) 1995; Silberstein 1994).
2. Linguistic model. Literature provides examples of "good" writing, linguistic diversity, expressive ranges, and so on.
3. Mental training. Better than any other discipline, literature trains the mind and sensibility.
4. Extension of linguistic competence. Literature stretches the competences of learners who have mastered the linguistic rudiments.
5. Authenticity. Literature is genuine linguistic material, not a linguistically contrived textbook (Duff and Maley 1990).
6. Memorability. Because literature, especially poetry and songs, is memorable, it can be a memorised archive of linguistic usage (Maley and Moulding 1985).
7. Rhythmic resource. Poems assist the learner in assimilating the rhythms of a language (Maley and Moulding 1985).
8. Motivating material. Literature is more likely to engage with and motivate a learner than artificial teaching inputs because it is generated by some genuine impulse on the part of the writer and deals with subjects and themes which may be of interest to the learner (Duff and Maley 1990).

9. Open to interpretation. Because literature is open to interpretation, it can serve as a basis for “genuine interaction” between learners (Duff and Maley 1990).

10. Convenience. Literature is a handy (photocopiable) resource.

Lazar (1993:15-9) and others suggest that, literature, in a classroom, gives the learners, enough cultural background that is needed for the language in question, and by increasing the interpretative and the imaginative abilities of the learners so far as it helps, encourages and fosters language acquisition.

Some of the above mentioned points are of course questionable because they have very little concerning language teaching as such, directly, but only they serve as aids, if at all. Moreover, the same can be effected by things other than just literature.

3. Literature and language acquisition

We must forego the literary supremacy ringing in the third reason above, as the training of the mind in the said way is achieved not just by literature, but by a myriad of other things in the arts and humanities like music, acting etc. In an oft cited interview, H.G. Widdowson argued that “reading literary discourse can assist students in the development of sense-making procedures of the kind required for the interpretation of or sensitization to language use in any discourse context” (Carter 1988:17-18). Here is an extract from the interview:

If you're a sensible teacher you use every resource that comes to hand. But the difference between conventional discourse and literature is that in conventional discourse you can anticipate, you can take shortcuts; when reading a passage, let's say, you often know something about the topic the passage deals with, and you can use that knowledge while reading naturally in order to find out what's going on in the passage. This is a natural reading procedure: we all do it. The amount of information we normally take out of something we read is minimal, actually, because we simply take from the passage what fits the frame of reference we have already established before reading. Now you can't do that with literature . . . because you've got to find the evidence, as it were, which is representative of some new reality. So, with literary discourse the actual procedures for making sense are much more in evidence. You've got to employ interpretative procedures in a way which isn't required of you in the normal reading process. If you want to develop these procedural abilities to make sense of discourse, then literature has a place. (Rossner 1983; ctd. Brumfit and Carter 1986: 13-4 and Carter 1988:18).

There are a few problems with the view presented here. Firstly, it is difficult to accurately define what exactly constitutes literature, as such, since even a general discourse, not just literature, would affect the same goals in the learners. It is not merely the *Kind* of literature that is split here, but the *degree*. That is, to what extent, the aid, be it a text or not is able to foster in the learner, the above said abilities for successful language acquisition. And the above procedures arrive ultimately at what Sperber and Wilson (1995:2) called, “inferential

model” of communication, whereby “communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence.” The whole idea boils down to saying that since literature fosters some kind of special inference, its existence and usage in language is somehow justified. This is clearly, as can be seen, stretching things too far. However, recent research in language teaching in early education yielded the results that are in favour of literature. The case was made in this manner: it was Kokkola (2002) who conducted research among nine and ten-year olds in Finland schools. Bruner’s (1986) concept of “the narrative mode” of human thought which “leads people, in their search for meaning, to create stories, myths and rituals” (Kokkola 2002: 243) was used. With some other points made, the conclusion was that, because of the better compatibility to their cognitive processes, young language-learners “are likely to get on better with narrative than non-narrative” (ibid.)

4. Literature and cultural competence

In this age of multiculturalism, it is actually not surprising, if not expected, that the primary and foremost support of literature in language teaching is the reason of its fostering, however uniquely put aside for a while, of the cultural, racial, religious, ethnic diversity and the sensitizing of the young language learners to the opposite lines, perspectives and concepts of world views, which could only fairly argued to be very vital to a healthy global village. This is generally easily refuted. It must be kept in mind that, though Sell (2002a: 19) supports the “participatory pedagogy, whose overarching aim will be to give language learners a chance to try on the alien culture for size,” the same should not result in the forfeiture of native identities of the language learners.

Reading “like a native”, as is sometimes said as a cliché, is not the same as actually “going” native, which has farfetched outcomes and limitations that do not pertain to language teaching at all. But when understanding the foreign culture, perspectives, worldviews and concepts is the basic goal of foreign language education programmes, which it often is, this is welcome. According to Erving Goffman (1990), the replacement of the native identities actually does not take place, but only the learners are equipped with the tenets of the foreign culture whose language is in question of learning.

Thus, rather than having a preconceived bias toward the culture of the target language, and teach the language in one limited particular frame of culture, it is better still, to use the target language to get the learners familiar with other cultures than native through the target language. In fact, this would be more engaging and inclusive for the learners of a foreign language.

Also, it is high time that the teachers teaching English as a foreign language recognized that what is being taught is no longer one of the native standards of the language, and the growing understanding of the fact that there is nothing like linguistic purity or linguistic deviance. But rather, what the learners of the English as a foreign language need today is a “stateless”

lingua franca, a language not stained by the attempts of standardization and culturalisation, but one with the ability and the power to adapt to the local and non native linguistic environments- a kind of language which will be useful and effective for communication with both native and non native speakers of the English language. After all, it remains to be recognized only by a few that there are not only more cultures than just the British and the American, and that there are cultures which have been more influential than the two.

Finally, literature should not be seen as a way of raising the awareness of the learners of the multicultural world out there, and if at all, not just the native English literature should be studied. English as a foreign language should be treated as, and rightly so, primarily, a communicative, transactional, functional, and more importantly, an international language.

It remains then, if English has to be taught as purely a *lingua franca*, the teaching of English literature in and of itself, taken unnecessary and untenable. The specifics of a particular vernacular of the English language, and the study of English literature would then remain as an Endeavour in the higher education as is the actual case and necessity today.

6. Conclusions

The use of English literature in an English language classroom is both justified and commended, in the light of its relevance and its ability to aid language acquisition. And it should be kept in mind that literature written or translated into the target language would make the learners not only aware of the culture and worldview of the target language, but also prepare them for future interactions and the need to adapt to the same. Moreover, if one wants to use literature in the language classroom, one has to carefully choose the right kind of pieces of literature suited to the context and sensibilities of the learners. Out of all the materials that are made use of in the language classrooms, literature should feature in any education system.

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