Role of Literature in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Literature can play a significant part in acquiring a foreign language. Literature and literary competence should no longer be separated from language acquisition in foreign language curricula. Literary texts provide us with much aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure in that the writers often seek to delineate their vision of human experience through a creative, emotive use of language. This symbolic density in literature provides much impetus for language learning. Literature thus serves to enhance the student’s language competence.

The study of English literature stimulates personal growth and encourages moral education. Literature or literary language deviates from ordinary language. The literary works elicit strong emotional responses and helps the students express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings. This also helps the students learn many things like critical thinking and generating discussion. If we take literary works like novels, plays and poems, they convey their message in a special use of language which has varied features. So literature has certain kinds of linguistic features but is not totally different from other forms of language.

Key Words: Literature, impetus for Language, personal growth, critical thinking and instills interest.

Introduction

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There has been a positive swing to using literature in a language context, opening up a whole new world to the language learner. Literary texts were often thought to embody archaic language which had a place only in the literature classroom and not in the world of day to day speech. With the emergence of Communicative Approach it meant that literature could be used as stimulus for discussion and genuine communication. Using literature could also be considered to be a means of internalizing specific grammatical constructions and reinforcing points previously learned. Enkvist (1964) claims that a study of a variety of texts will provide a short-cut to the extensive experience of linguistic items in context that native speakers acquire by direct exposure. Some language teachers might still feel reluctant to use literature, perhaps because of certain cultural implications. In fact, one of the advantages of using literature is that it can serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written. Valdes (1986) also warns us however, not to use literature only as a means of imparting cultural information.

The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays. At elementary levels, for example, students are given simplified or specially written stories. At advanced levels, for example, students are given literature in its original form so that they can develop their literary competence in the target language. To put it another way, students learn practically the figurative and daily use of the language in the literary texts and encounter different genres of literature (i.e. poems, short stories, plays etc.) at advanced levels. Observing how characters in a play or a short story use figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor, etc. so as to express their communicative intention, students learn how to write English more clearly, creatively, and powerfully. The use of drama seems to be an effective technique in today’s communication-based, student-centred foreign language teaching. Particularly, teachers, who wish to make language learning more colourful, motivating and interesting, can make use of drama in their language classes. Since drama is the reenactments of social events, students improve their personality and code of
behaviour. Thus, they can achieve more meaningful and realistic teaching from which students can benefit to a great extent. Poetry is one of the most effective and powerful transmitters of culture. Poems comprise so many cultural elements and makes students familiar with figures of speech (i.e. simile, metaphor, irony, personification, imagery, etc.) due to their being a part of daily language use.

The study of literature, is not merely concerned with skill acquisition. It serves the larger purpose of fostering in us a comprehensive outlook of life. What literary texts ultimately seek to portray are universal human values and the values of the culture from which they spring. It contributes to an understanding of ourselves and our relations with our fellow beings. Through literary studies, we learn to become more mature, liberal and responsible people. Its encouragement for sympathy and tolerance, its plea for open-mindedness, is surely an admirable educational aim that learners readily embrace. In view of this grand purpose, there is all the more reason for the inclusion of literature. Through literature, the student can attain a growth in understanding, a flexibility of mind, which undoubtedly facilitates their efficient handling of their work.

Literature plays an essential role in language teaching for teaching grammar to students. The key to its success hinges largely on the texts selected. Well-chosen texts will, of course, facilitate learning; ill-chosen ones, however may alienate student interest, irrespective of the teacher’s skill and experience. In determining what literary texts would work best in the classroom, one needs to be clear about the major purposes that grammar students should seek to accomplish through reading literature. As stated earlier, these aims comprise the enjoyment and appreciation of literary texts, the refinement of language skills, cultural enrichment and growth in understanding. Together they furnish a broad framework from which guidelines may be elicited for selecting appropriate texts.

Povey suggests that a “Workable” literary text is one that the teacher himself/herself enjoys (1979: 164). One of the chief attractions of literature is that it delights. Students will keenly feel this effect if the teachers enjoy the texts they are teaching. The latter’s enthusiasm enables them to share readily with the former the joy they have derived from the literary works. However, teachers need to make sure that the texts they wish to read with their students generally appeal to them, taking into account their age level and general interest (Yorke, 1980: 314). For instance, a stylistically intricate or culturally unfamiliar text may be more suitable material for senior classes than for freshmen classes. There is also an extra benefit for grammar students to have a more balanced reading list containing both traditional and contemporary materials; it offers them a broader picture of the cultural and socio-historical background of the country whose language they are learning.

This leads to the next major criterion for text selection – that the texts chosen should be “Culturally significant” (Adeyanju, 1978). As indicated earlier, the issue of employing literature as a transmitter of culture is tricky, and one needs to be cautious when applying this principle in text selection. Regardless of what approach they take, historical or topical, most literature teachers are inclined to include in their syllabus the “established” authors and canons, which run the gamut of the writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Jacobeans, the Metaphysicals, the Augustans, the Romantics, the Victorians and the Moderns. Good ‘established’ literary works are western biased and class biased. It deepens their cultural awareness; it sheds light on this complex of human experience, thereby encouraging us to approach our problems with greater patience and our relations with our fellow beings with more understanding and tolerance.

Literature is a useful tool for developing language skills and transmitting culture. Most significantly it allows an insight into the human world. Selected literature works effectively among students. In the search for an appropriate text, a constant need to exercise one’s own judgement is essential. In general, texts chosen should be culturally significant. It should arouse students’ interest and encourage student’s personal response. Texts that fulfill these criteria will surely facilitate effective teaching in the literature classroom for grammar students.

Literature helps improve the knowledge of English in many ways. Literary pieces are susceptible to multiple levels of interpretation. In a literary work content is communicated in many different ways. The intent of the message is unraveled by the individual readers. Students get absorbed in the story and the language is understood easily when explained. The most important function of using literature is its motivating role for performance within the classroom. Study of literary pieces provides opportunities to the class to reflect on the grammar points (related to the events), share the opinions and get involved in discussions.

The first importance of English language is that it helps students communicate in the interconnected and interdependent world. Literature is not only a tool for developing the written and oral skills of the students in the target language but also a window opening into the culture of the target language, building up a cultural competence in students. Due to globalisation, English has become the need of the hour for better jobs and a better career because not the mere use of language but the use of spoken and written English in the right grammatical form is important.
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