

The Impact of Using Literature on Foreign Language Learning Development

The Case of Third Year Secondary School (Biskra)

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Abstract

Linguistics and literature are two interwoven domains though they seem different. They play a major role in one's (foreign) language learning process. In the 20th century, the relationship between linguistics and literature has changed and became more interesting to know that they can, together, enhance language learning/teaching. The development of the communicative approaches to language learning, the aim of language learning was to encourage the communicative competence in the foreign language, so that students would have the opportunity to express their ideas in the target language. Teaching literature can provide assistance in language learning as it makes teaching/ learning linguistic features easier and motivating. Using literary texts in teaching the assigned language forms is, then, of vital importance as it provides learners with authentic and cultural material for language learning and encourages their cognitive and communicative processes. In this paper, we shall shed light on two arguments for teaching literature in the foreign language class. 1. Literature helps in language acquisition through inferencing and narratives that suit students' cognitive development; 2. It gives access into the target culture and facilitates its potential contact with the learners' culture.

Keywords: language, literature, language acquisition, cognitive development, cultural awareness

1. Introduction

The interaction between literature and linguistics is required due to the massive progress in theory and research that call for integrating the two fields when designing language programs. Teaching literature might be preferred because it improves language learning as learners are mainly cognitively skilful when dealing with narratives; FL literature may give learners insight into the target language culture and prepare them to act appropriately in potential future contacts.

Standard FL textbooks are fictions in a variety of ways. They provide learners with unreal version of English. Because they use fictional storylines to introduce learners to various situations, points of grammar or lexical fields and often employ non-authentic recordings of actors with bogus accents for listening exercises.

Textbook topic contents are sometimes irrelevant and unreal to the learners as much of the content often fails to address the issues that concern learners or are likely to confront them in real-life. For example, there is little about sex, drugs, alcohol, racism, loneliness, fear, bullying, violence, dying, etc. This is where literature can fill the gap, providing authentic topics. Hence, the literature which is appropriately selected with respect to the social and cultural environment, the level of psychological development, and the interests, concerns and aspirations of learners can, if used wisely, be an effective tool for stimulating and enhancing language learning and equipping learners with relevant linguistic and socio-cultural competences.

2. Background of the Study

The development of communicative approaches to language learning has emphasised the importance of the communicative competence in the target language, where students would have the opportunity to express themselves freely in the FL, i.e.; the focus should be on the process of communication rather than just mastery of language forms (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Literature has experienced a revival with the advent of communicative approach in language teaching as it provides learners with authentic, pleasurable and cultural material (Hall 2005: 47-57).

The potential benefits of using literary texts in the language classroom have been widely discussed (Maley and Duff, 1989; Carter et al., 1989; Widdowson, 1992; Kramsch, 1993; Lazar, 1993; Carter and McRae, 1996; Edmonson, 1997). In particular, Gilroy and Parkinson 997), Belcher and Hirvela (2000), Vandrick (2003), Kim (2004) and Sánchez (2008) discuss the use literature in teaching English as a foreign language while Keunen and Eeckhouf (2001), and Hall (2005) focus on the position of literature in foreign language teaching. In addition, Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000: 9-11) stress the role of literature in providing an excellent model for good writing: it is memorable, non-trivial and challenging, and it also helps assimilate the rhythms of a language, therefore facilitating intelligence and sensibility training. Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000), Carter and Stockwell (2008) and Paran (2008) provide comprehensive and accurate reports on the state of the matter.

According to Maley (2001), literary texts present an ideal tool for both enhancing literary comprehension (understanding) and developing students' communicative skills in the FL because literary texts provide authentic instances of the FL, help learners express themselves correctly and freely and more importantly

they represent a background on which FL learners will rely when writing. Moreover, literature helps enhance the cognitive and psycholinguistic aspect of language learning as it focuses on form and discourse processing skills and improves vocabulary expansion and reading skills. The text seems to be the perfect vehicle to investigate the stylistic features of an author and the characteristics of a period. However, texts can also be explored at different levels: they can present information about culture and society and may be analysed with different purposes (Sánchez, 2008).

Burke and Brumfit (1986:171-2) state that literature promotes [...] social skills [...] respect for literacy and cultural tradition; and provides information about literature, literary traditions and language. In other words, using literary texts in FL class enhances students' social and communicative skills and highlights the aspects of the target culture. Lazar (1993:15-9) proposes that literature in the FL classroom motivates, facilitates access to cultural background, encourages language acquisition, expands language awareness, develops students' interpretative abilities and educates the whole person in so far as it enhances our imaginative and affective capacities.

The major shifts that took place recently have deeply unsettled the conventions in both domains and create promising changes for a fundamental reconciliation which would result in more frequent and productive interactions. In this respect, the call for teaching literature in the foreign language classes is one of the compromises that would promote language learning.

3. Method

Following our aim to highlight the importance of teaching literature in the language class and the positive effects it may have on students learning we elaborated the following study:

3.1. Participants

The participants are taken as a random sample of fifty (50) third year secondary school students, and five (5) EFL teachers from different high schools in Biskra.

3.2. Data Collection Procedures

This study aimed to investigate the role of teaching literature in the FL class. The overall analysis and the data collection methods included in the study are of qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers by the researcher to determine their previous teaching approaches, their students' level, their conceptions of including literary texts when teaching language structures/functions/forms...etc, and how the use of literature to teach the language helped them increase students' motivation and proficiency level. In addition to the interviews, the researcher has undertaken a questionnaire to students to check their opinions about using literature in class.

The students were asked to answer a questionnaire of 15 questions to obtain data about:

- Their reason to study English.
- Their conception of the importance of literature in their language class.
- Whether or not their learning of English improved when dealing narratives.
- Whether or not they prefer to learn the FL through literary texts or mere grammar and instruction

- Whether or not the short stories helped them understand the different language functions and structures in the courses.
- Whether or not the literary texts give them insights about the target culture (English).
- Whether or not they see that learning the English culture threatens their own culture and identity.
- Whether they think that the language course should contain injections of English literature/culture and authentic texts/ issues instead of artificial topics (mere grammatical focus).

4. Results

4.1. The Interview:

The teachers revealed that they did not think of including literature in language teaching before especially that students' level was not appropriate. However, after using short stories students become more motivated, attentive and interested. Learning different language forms, structures and functions become a simple task as students found it easy to remember what they had practised in the story. Teachers had their students carry out writing tasks to check what they have learnt through the literary texts. Teachers admit that there was a salient progress in students' writing after using short stories.

4.2. The Questionnaire:

The participants gave different reasons/ motives behind their choice to study English. They preferred using literary texts in learning English and found that it is

helpful and interesting. Also, students saw that their awareness of the target culture aspects had increased after dealing with literature because it represents authentic and real-life issues. 80% of the respondents stated that their culture is not threatened by the target culture and called for inserting literature in the FL curriculum.

5. Discussion

5.1. Literature Promotes Language Learning/ Acquisition

A significant relationship has been detected between literature and foreign language learning. Using literature in class is found to improve and facilitate FL acquisition. Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000) believe that teaching literature in the FL class trains the mind better than any other discipline. This belief is traced by Parkinson and Reid to F.R. Leavis's *Education and the University* (1943), though it is said to go back further than that. This idea becomes one of the main scientific defences of literature in the language classroom. Piaget's (1971) cognitive theory of language learning has been crucial in the field of education. Learning starts with adaptation which is achieved through assimilation and accommodation. Piaget states that assimilation is the process in which one gets information and makes sense of it or change the information to make it fit. Accommodation and assimilation go hand in hand. By accommodation, however, he means the process in which one uses assimilation to change his or her thought patterns. According to Piaget, then, language learning should proceed through some important steps in order for it to be successful. These steps include understanding of students' thinking, matching strategies to abilities and constructing Knowledge which means to understand how students think in order to respond to their needs, relate the strategies used in class to students abilities and cognitive capacities and finally build up knowledge. After

comprehending how the students think, teachers might well choose the best literary texts that correspond to their interest. The literary text should be relevant the learners' cognitive level and not beyond.

H.G. Widdowson (1992) 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). "With literary discourse the actual procedures for making sense are much more in evidence". What can be clearly seen in Widdowson's view that literary texts usually require a greater amount of inferencing than other texts. The significance of that for FL learning is that, supposedly, "Such training in deciphering the [literary] communication, working out the precise nature of its communicative acts, by projecting yourself backwards and forwards, in and outside and across the discourse can be a key element in the acquisition of discoursal skills in the target language (Carter 1988: 18).

We may assume that language textbooks are regarded as literature (or, at least, as a sub-species of literature) supposing that they are composed of some real communicative acts. If we apply Widdowson's argument, when using these books, students will be trained in inferencing which is a helpful skill to use when learning languages. In other words, when using the textbook, one is learning a language as well as when reading a foreign newspaper. Inferencing is not then limited to the interpretation of literature but it's basic to all cognition and we do it all the time.

However, recent work on FL teaching proposes that literature may have another significant role in FL acquisition besides inferencing. Kokkola (2002) has conducted a study with nine- and ten-year old Finnish schoolchildren, basing her research on two

theoretical concepts: The first is 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). The second is Egan's (e.g. 1988a and 1988b) view of learning as a sort of "mythic thought" whereby "complex ideas [are structured] within the framework of a story" (ibid.). Bruner and Egan argue that stories or narratives are one of the most effective ways of structuring ideas and information (also Fuller 1982). Egan suggests the mythic thought to be a stage in a child's psychological development and that "stories are one of the earliest forms of organizing schemata" and precede other systems, such as hierarchical organization (ibid. 244).

Kokkola supposes that young learners are cognitively adept at narratives and stories. She hypothesizes that young language-learners "are likely to get on better with narrative than non-narrative" (ibid.) because narratives suit their cognitive processes. This research shows that learners face few learning difficulties when using narrative texts as learning materials. However, these texts should be appropriately selected to fit learners' needs and level. Kokkola claims that if suitable texts are chosen, then, "only narrative texts should be used in the early stages of EFL reading education" (ibid.).

5.2. Literature Enhances Cultural Awareness

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1934) has been recognised as a fundamental work in cognitive development over the past decades. He believed that language develops from social interactions, for communication purposes. Vygotsky viewed language as man's greatest tool, a means for communicating with the outside

world. According to Vygotsky (1962) language plays 2 critical roles in cognitive development:

1: It is the main means by which adults transmit information to children.

2: Language itself becomes a very powerful tool of intellectual adaptation.

Vygotsky places more emphasis on culture affecting/shaping cognitive development - this contradicts Piaget's view of universal stages and content of development. Accordingly, Vygotsky claimed that language, society and culture are related aspects. Language is the main tool used to link members of society together and enable them to communicate. Through language information are transmitted from the old to the young and it is the main tool of academic life. In other words, language should not be taught/ learned out from its context (society).

Language is learned better in/through its cultural context particularly after multiculturalism has set up itself in the world and diversity/ differences have been accepted and tolerated. In EFL classes, teaching literature which represents language in its social cultural context has become a fundamental interest in the educational field. Using literature to teach language has improved and flourished in the recent decades because it promotes cultural, ethnic, religious...awareness. In addition to that, teaching literature in the FL class provides language learners with the relevant cultural competences and equips them with the target culture pragmatics. The literature used in the EFL class is written in English, so learners deal mostly with foreign (here English) cultural aspects. Language learners are expected to explore, to understand, to analyse and to compare the target culture to theirs but not to lose their native identities. Doing so, FL learners are supposed to be more careful about preserving their own cultural identity.

Teaching literature also provides learners with the socio-psychological constituents around which they construct effective identities that will facilitate their socialization in the target culture. According to the social psychologist Erving Goffman (1990), these identities do not replace the learners' selves, but are the culturally effective and palatable identities which the learners may elect to project or present before the target culture. This clarifies the relationship between language and culture. Culture is not linguistically determined, nor is language culturally determined. A culture has, among many other means, language to support its self-expression. The main goal of EFL learners is not to speak English like the English themselves, but it is to be able to communicate in English language. Also, using literature in class assists the teacher to act as a supporter to students who will interact to build knowledge via collaborative learning. When reading the texts, learners will be able to raise questions, to make summaries, to think critically and to hold points of view. This is according to Vygotsky's (1978) theory is "reciprocal teaching", teachers and students will be able to collaborate in learning and practicing four key skills: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. The teacher's role in the process is reduced over time

6. Conclusion

The use of literature in the FL class is very important because: Firstly, target language literature may enhance language learning since the cognitive processes of young learners are particularly adept at dealing with narrative structures at primary level. Secondly, literature written in the target language or translated into the target language may give learners insight into other cultures, thus preparing them to act

competently and appropriately in future dealings with representatives from those cultures, where the channel of communication is likely to be English.

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