

Why & Why Not Literature: A Task-Based Approach to Teaching Literature

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Abstract

Having been teachers for some years, the researchers have appreciated the paramount significance and vicarious experience of being indulged in the world of literature. Astonishingly enough, quite a few teachers in junior high schools and high schools in Iran and elsewhere have acknowledged the indispensable role of literature to ameliorate learners' language development, cultural awareness, pragmatic awareness, emotional intelligence, critical thinking as well as their motivation. Therefore, to bridge the present vacuum, the present review tries to encompass three sections to firstly demystify the misconceptions surrounding English language teachers about the role of literature, and to secondly alleviate the ostensible obfuscations intimidating them to overlook literature in their classes. Finally, we propose a new model called "Whole Literary Involvement" and provide teachers with a succinct procedure of how to utilize and integrate literature in their classes capitalizing upon task-based approach.

Keywords: Literature, Language teaching, Task-based approach

1. Introduction

It sounds quite axiomatic that our major accountability as teachers of English as a Foreign Language is to assist our learners to reach their best potentials and to be eventually communicatively competent. But to do this successfully, we ought to go beyond the traditionally held views of mastering linguistic accuracy of form and structure because they do not definitely guarantee to be semantically, syntactically, and, above all, pragmatically competent. It is believed that literature could serve this end. It is often reported by English language teachers that the abstruse complexities and intricate obfuscations of literature have halted them to take the initiative to draw on literature in their classes. Yet the researchers personally postulate that some English language teachers are not cognizant of those user-friendly literary texts, techniques and procedures of implementing literature in their classes. Therefore, the present review seeks to firstly review the obstacles which have long hindered teachers from using literature in their classes, and to secondly review its benefits, and to finally provide them with a succinct procedure through which they can proceed to teach literature effortlessly and enjoyably through task-based approach.

2. Why Not Literature

Unfortunately, literature has not been embraced enthusiastically by teachers in junior high schools and high schools in Iran because a couple of reasons have deterred language teachers from embarking upon literature in their classes, the most intimidating of which lies in the complexities of literature. This idea is also espoused by

Or (1995) who cogently asserts that there is a general perception that literature is bewilderingly complex and inaccessible for the foreign language learner and can even be detrimental to the process of language learning.

In like manner, Savvidou (2004) states that the reasons for which teachers often regard literature inappropriate to the language classroom may be attributed to the common perceptions held about literature and literary language. The first reason is the creative use of language in poetry and prose which often deviates from the conventions and rules governing standard, non-literary discourse, as in the case of poetry where grammar and lexis may be manipulated to serve orthographic or phonological features of the language. The second reason is that the reader is required to have greater effort to construe literary texts since meaning is disentangled from the reader's immediate social context; one instance is that the "I" in literary discourse may not be the same person as the writer. Moreover, Chick *et al* (2009) conclude that when students are confronted with a difficult text or complex idea, instructors may experience them as shutting down and refusing to venture an interpretation or even to continue reading.

Alternatively, Robson (1989) explicates that since there are a host of syntactic and lexical difficulties inherent in literature, it can do little or nothing to help learners become competent users of English language. Some also contend that literary texts are loaded with obsolete and outdated words such as "thee and thou" not normally seen in Standard English which, in turn, would contribute to aversion.

Selection of materials is also a hindering obstacle for both learners and teachers to subsume literature in their syllabi. In their materials selection, teachers should scrutinize different factors affecting learning including learners' language proficiency, age, gender, topical knowledge and alike. The level of text difficulty, the kind of genre, are (omit it) the kind of literature (escape or interpretive) are just a few important aspects of materials selection. Nevertheless, Carter & Long (1991) argue that these problems can be alleviated by selecting an appropriate text for an appropriate group of language learners.

Similarly, Maley (1989) postulates that unfamiliarity with certain literary genres and conventions might compound the complexities of literature. He goes on to explicate that lack of knowledge about literary concepts makes the texts demanding to perceive. Moreover, when the texts are bewildering, learners cannot seize the opportunity to take advantage of literary experience. McKay (1982) judiciously puts forward that in order for interaction to occur between the text and the reader the book must be right and the reader must also be right in the sense that he must be in a frame of mind and in a situation where he is cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically prepared and able to embrace the book in the right way. This interaction is called the literary experience. He also states that the immediate pleasure or satisfaction to be derived from reading or hearing literature is the pleasure derived from a special kind of emotional and intellectual involvement. Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011) postulate that a viable solution to the inherent complexities of literary notions and concepts lies in the selection of texts which best suits the learners' current and potential level of literary knowledge or teaching these new literary concepts and notions prior to having the learners read the related literary text.

3. Why Literature

The merits of literature are multifarious. In this section, we enumerate the advantages and reasons for which implementing literature in junior high schools and high schools in Iran and elsewhere sounds quite plausible. In the following sections, we will discuss how literature can be illuminating for English language classes.

3.1 Literature in Terms of Language Learning

The first advantage of literature which merits paying attention to is its function in language learning. Literature can serve this purpose by having different aspects of language authentically within itself including not only syntax and lexis but also pragmatic and cultural points not easily found in non-literary texts. Van (2009) states that since literature is full of instances of real-life language in various situations, it provides unprecedented opportunities to ameliorate syntactic, pragmatic, cultural, and discursual awareness among learners.

In a similar line of inquiry, McKay (2001) persuasively asserts that since certain syntactic patterns and certain stylistic word order inversions occur more frequently in literature, it can be an ideal reading content for EFL classroom because it involves the integration of four language skills, it also promotes students' close reading of texts, and it is an ideal source for extensive reading programs in L2 classroom because becoming engaged with literature will certainly increase students' interest in reading. Considering the writing skill, Stern (2001) mentions that literature can be a rich and provocative source for writing in ESL/EFL contexts. As literary texts are much richer in terms of style of writing, scope of vocabulary, and array of grammatical points, it is highly probable that upon using them EFL learners may encounter, more difficult structures and learn many more vocabulary

items in terms of denotative as well as connotative meanings, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, slangs, and colloquialism.

The other benefit that literature brings about is cultural awareness. McKay (1982) cites Allen (1975, p.111) as judiciously arguing that it is important that students understand cultural issues by saying that "Literature is a facet of a culture." In other words, Literature and culture are inextricably bound together. So, students come to understand cultural differences through diverse literary texts. Literature, moreover, promotes cultural and intercultural awareness (Van, 2009) especially in the era of globalization (Tayebipour, 2009). In the era of globalization, there is a growing concern of universally shared needs and wants rather than individual needs. Since literature deals with universal concepts (Maley, 1989), there is an urge to grab on literature as an input source for flourishing language learners' competence. Globalization cries for joining hands not only in economy, politics, sociology, etc but also in language-related fields such as ELT. According to Maley (1989), literature deals with universal concepts such as love, hatred, death, nature, etc are common to all languages and cultures. The similarities and even differences between cultures and languages can further our understanding of the whole world.

The researchers have experienced that through the medium of literature we can provide our learners with ample language opportunities and fun experiences that not only encourage and enhance oral language, but also strengthen and deepen their writing abilities. By giving summaries, dramatizations, simulations and role plays, students will have a lot of oral practice which, in turn, contributes to writing enhancement.

3.2 Literature and Motivation

The second advantage of literature which is highlighted here is its impetus to bring about desirable motivation on the part of the learners. Literature is a voyage of discovery since it abounds with a welter of new experiences all of which are applicable and apropos to the real world situations. When something is pertinent to the real life situations, it arouses interest and enthusiasm in the learners; consequently, they become motivated and immersed in the experiences of any kind they wish. The result of this immersion and engagement is what all of us are seeking i.e., learning. McKay (1982) recapitulates that to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. In a similar line of inquiry, Ghosn (2002) and Van (2009) argue that literary texts are very motivating due to their authenticity and the meaningful context they provide. Our experience shows that motivation is especially achieved when students are exposed to what they really enjoy and students are highly motivated when they are exposed to literary texts for language learning purposes (Khatib *et al.*, 2011). Shrestah (2008) also highlights the paramount significance of motivation and authenticity that short stories bring about.

Moreover, the appeal of the stories to such junior high school and high school students substantiates that the power of literature is formidable in attracting the audience through its superb illustrations to clarify and extend the language. It could also magnify a visually aesthetic experience in the learners. Therefore, learners' motivation is augmented, and learning is facilitated as its result.

3.3 Literature as an Agent of Change

There is compelling evidence from my classes and elsewhere (Ghosn, 2002) that literature has the potentiality to change attitudes and perceptions, and to diminish negative conducts and prejudices while boosting catharsis, empathy, sympathy, forgiveness, tolerance, etc. Since different stories encompass diverse themes, students can get familiarized with these insightful themes which can be extrapolated to the real-world situations. Ghosn also cites Bettelheim (1986) who puts forth that through literature learners come to appreciate and perceive themselves and others more thoroughly so that they can sympathize and empathize with the characters in the stories and then they can generalize the feelings and emotions to the real-world contexts.

Furthermore, it is believed that literature has a well-rooted pedagogical value since it can involve learners in problem-solving tasks through resolving conflicts. Children's stories are also replete with perceptible conflicts for readers to identify with, and that empower learners to commiserate with characters experiencing challenging conflicts in hazardous situations (Ghosn, 2002). Having elaborated on the themes, plots, characterizations, points of view, symbols and allegory, the teacher will definitely empower the learners to conceive their world better, to discover their own solutions, thus boosting the skills and insights they are in need of while dealing with conflicts themselves (Schomberg, 1993). The experiences in the classes run by the authors of this paper substantiate that learners develop rapport through literature, have a strong predilection to sympathize and empathize with others through dramatizations and role plays, have a proclivity to negotiate the conflicts and resolve them, and feel like cooperating and collaborating with others.

In a nutshell, upon an in-depth review of literature on consensuses and controversies of literature in EFL classes, Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) conclude that "the current consensus of opinion regarding the integration of literature in language programs is overwhelming, and by far exceeds the points of controversy. This consensus holds great promises as it is informed by current research in language teaching, language learning and acquisition, and psychology" (p. 35).

4. Methodological Approaches to Teaching Literature: Four Models

There have been some approaches to implementing literature in EFL/ESL classrooms which are as follows:

a. Maley's (1989) approaches to teaching literature:

❖ *The critical literary approach*

The focus is on plot, characterization, motivation, value, psychology, background, literary concepts etc. In so doing, the students should have already mastered the intermediate level and they should be familiar with literary conventions.

❖ *The stylistic approach*

The emphasis here is on text, description and analysis of language prior to making interpretation.

b. Carter and Long's (1991)

❖ *Language-based Model*

❖ *Literature as Content or Culture Model*

❖ *Literature as Personal Growth or Enrichment*

c. Amer's (2003) approaches to teaching L1 narrative texts in EFL/ESL literature

❖ *The Story Grammar Approach (SGA)*

❖ *Reader Response Approach (RRA)*

d. Van's Approaches (2009)

❖ *New criticism*

❖ *Critical Literacy*

❖ *Stylistics*

❖ *Reader-Response*

❖ *Language-based*

❖ *Structuralism*

Considering the abovementioned strong points for the use of literature in EFL classes, and the negligence of the practical side of the above models, we postulate that a task-based approach to teaching literature could encourage language teachers to implement literature in their classes, so the following section will be allocated to the practical aspects of integrating literature drawing on task-based approach.

5. A Task-based Approach to Teaching Literature

What exactly is a "task"? How does it possibly differ from other terms such as "activity", or "exercise" or "drill" which have overwhelmingly dominated our classes to teach learners language and to facilitate the process of learning? There is compelling evidence in the history of language teaching that there is no consensus about the definition of a "task", and its definition is a bit controversial. Nunan (1989) explicates that a communicative task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (p. 10). The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand as a communicative act in its own right. Skehan (1996) defines task as "an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome" (p.38).

In our model, task is defined as a piece of language that linguistically, physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, critically, meaningfully, creatively, consciously or subconsciously, aesthetically, spontaneously, motivationally, and experientially involves learners in the process of learning. This is what we call "*Whole Literary Engagement*" or simply WLE. Literature is a means through which this whole engagement could easily be achieved provided that teachers contemplate upon different ways through which their learners can be wholly involved. It also requires them to scrutinize different aspects and components of the desired task such as goals,

setting, activities, teacher role and learner role. Having done this meticulous scrutiny, teachers are in a position to think of the procedures to achieve WLE.

6. Classroom Techniques and Procedures

In order to have a communicative approach to teaching literature, it is better to divide the procedures into three phases:

- I. Pre-task
- II. During-task
- III. Post-task

I. Pre-task

1. Schema Building

- A. Brainstorming
 - a. Contextualization of the task (through pictures, realia, questions and answers)
 - b. Illustration of the context
 - c. Introduction of some of the key vocabulary items(through matching, predicting and guessing)
- B. Group Scaffolding
- C. Performing a similar task chorally

2. Authentic Listening Exposure

- A. Exposure to pertinent songs
- B. Listening to the relevant story

II. During-task

1. Task Performance

- A. Skimming and Scanning the text
- B. Discrimination (distinguishing between the main idea and supporting information; distinguishing between different characters' points of view)
- C. Identifying (point of view, character, and setting)
- D. Taking notes (jotting down the significant information in a text in your own words)
- E. Predicting (predicting what may happen in the story in case of dilemmas, and suspenses)
- F. Inferencing (using what you already know to understand something new better)
- G. Analysis (analyzing the stories in terms of plot, conflict, style and its purpose, and theme)
- H. Action
 - a. Role-playing
 - b. Simulation
 - c. Characterization
 - d. Dramatization
- I. Summarizing (it could be done in terms of students' recapitulation of what has happened in the story)
- J. Evaluating

III. Post-task

1. Repetition of the Task

2. Reflection on the Task Achievement

- A. Personalizing (relating the stories to their own personal lives)
- B. Self- evaluation of attainment

3. Follow-ups

- A. Pair and group rehearsal

- B. Accuracy-based tasks
- C. Student writing

7. Conclusion

Literature has not been enthusiastically embraced by many teachers in Iran and elsewhere simply because of the fact that they have misconstrued literature as being so bombastic, elaborate, and grandiloquent. We demystified here that this is not always the case. Literature enjoys a welter of merits from an increase in motivation, social or cultural awareness, linguistic development, and to even an agent of change. Most importantly, a task-based approach was proposed to illuminate a better pathway for those teachers who are still sceptic of the paramount priority of literature in their school classes as an adjunct so that the learners will be mesmerized and enthralled by the joyous experiences they get from this world of unprecedented importance.

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