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Why should literature be used in the language classroom?

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Abstract

Communicative methodologies that emerged in the 1970s stress the importance of using authentic materials and activities in the classroom in order to help students achieve communicative competence that will enable them to use the language for communicative purposes in the real world. However, the materials and classroom activities focus on the referential function of the language and do not offer opportunities for imaginative involvement. Therefore, students do not acquire the ability to understand the creative uses of the language or to function in situations in which they have to make interpretations and evaluations, and give their personal response and reaction. This paper argues that inclusion of literature in language teaching materials will provide students with the opportunities to experience and use the language more creatively and to develop greater awareness of the language they are learning.

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1. Introduction

Why are languages learned? There may be numerous different purposes, but they all have the same common denominator – language use. What kind of language use is learned in the classroom? Since the 1970s the language-teaching trends have centered on communicative teaching methods and approaches which emphasize that since language is primarily used for communication, the best way to learn a foreign language is through communicative activities in the classroom. As Allwright (1979: 167) puts it: '…if communication is THE aim, then it should be THE major element in the process'.

Communicative competence, as the generally accepted goal in ELT, consists of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence which enable the learners to cope with the most common situations they are likely to face (Canale and Swain, 1980: 29-31). Thus, activities used in the communicative language classroom include tasks such as comparing sets of pictures, giving instructions, completing a map, solving problems, discussions, dialogues, role plays and so on. The tendency to use authentic materials has brought into the classroom such teaching materials as maps, letters, recipes, newspaper articles, advertisements, postcards, brochures and the like, but this has resulted in students achieving 'only a competence limited to the referential function of language and hardly any ability to handle the expressive function' (Donnerstag, 1996 :1). If learners are to be encouraged to participate in a conversation in the classroom, they should be given a meaningful content that will provoke their interest, capture their imagination and give them something important to talk about. As Widdowson (1983: 33) observes:

'It's not easy to see how learners at any level can get interested in and therefore motivated by a dialogue about buying stamps at a post office. There is no plot, no mystery, there is no character; everything proceeds as if

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communication never created a problem. There's no misunderstanding, there's no possibility of any kind of interaction. What happens is that learners simply mouth the sentences of their parts, and you don't actually get them interested in what they are doing.'

2. Referential versus representational materials

The language normally used in the language classroom is referential, which means 'language which communicates on only one level, usually in terms of information being sought or given, or of a social situation being handled' (McRae, 1991: 3). It is the language used in everyday communication mainly for transactional purposes. The texts presented in FL textbooks are usually expository in which information is given explicitly, words are used with their denotative meaning and there is almost no figurative language. Therefore, it will only allow for 'communicative survival in carefully circumscribed environmental contexts' (McRae, 1991: 6). Such texts may be used for developing basic language and communicative skills. However, they do not offer scope for imaginative involvement and self-expression, and what is more important, they do not enable students to develop the so important 'fifth skill, *thinking in English*' (McRae, 1991: 5), which is essential for interpreting and understanding different kinds of texts and for developing language awareness.

If we do not want students to 'develop a narrow perception of language function and style' (Chan, 1999: 2), we have to expose them to a wide range of representational materials which invite learners to respond and react, to question and evaluate, to interact with the text, to get involved emotionally and creatively, and to relate it to their own experience. And this is where literature finds its way in the language classroom.

Furthermore, if motivation is one of the key factors for language learning and acquisition, then we certainly have an obligation to offer students more challenging and interesting texts and activities that will get them involved on a deeper level and create the feeling that they are using the language for real purposes.

3. Creativity as an omnipresent phenomenon

The skills obtained while studying literary texts will help learners become better, more aware readers of the world they live in (McRae, 1991: 10). For it is not only in literature that we can see the creative and imaginative use of language. It is present in road signs, advertisements, newspaper articles and headlines, shop and business names, notices, menus, etc. (Carter, 1997). Simpson (1996: 9) argues that for every device considered to be 'peculiar for literature, examples of it can be found outside literature'. Even ordinary everyday conversations show creative uses of language such as idioms, metaphors, proverbs, play with words, and so on, 'which are strongly associated with criteria for literariness' (Carter, 1997: 49), but people are so used to them that they are not even aware that they are using the language in a creative way.

Because of the figurative patterns of much of the ordinary everyday language, native speakers usually do not have difficulties in understanding figurative language in literature (Carter, 1997: 212). However, foreign language learners are not in such a favourable position because many languages have different ways of expressing the same ideas and notions, and very often the choice of metaphors reveals 'cultural attitudes to particular areas of human activity' (Carter, 1997: 88). Therefore, giving foreign language learners opportunities for discussion, evaluation and understanding the meaning of words and phrases, and developing their interpretational and inferential skills will make them more reflective and effective learners and users of the language. Carter (1997: 55) concludes:

'It can therefore be argued that to use in the language class only those types of dialogue that are transparent and transactional and devoid of richness, cultural reference and creativity is to misrepresent what speakers actually do and simultaneously to lose an opportunity for interesting language awareness work of the kind which may be an ideal precursor to enhanced literary awareness.'

4. Authenticity and motivation

One of the contributions of communicative language teaching is the insistence on authentic materials as a valuable source for learning the language because they show the reality of the language. If the ultimate goal in language teaching is to enable students to deal with the authentic language of the real world, they should learn how

to cope with it in the classroom (Hedge, 2000: 67). The use of authentic materials is in line with the experiential strategy of language learning which 'involves learners in authentic communication and in genuine experiences which have value, importance, or significance for them' (Stern, 1992: 302).

As literature is authentic text, the activities used with literary texts 'are genuine language activities, not ones contrived around a fabricated text' (Long, 1986: 58). It is especially important for more advanced learners to be exposed to a wide variety of authentic literary texts accompanied by tasks and questions that resemble real-life approaches to such texts. Not only do these texts motivate students and offer opportunities for discussions and enjoyment 'beyond the mere comprehension of information', but they also give students the satisfaction of knowing that they are reading literary texts in their original form (Ur, 1996: 155), which, on the other hand, helps build their reading confidence and gives them assurance in their ability to use the language.

Another benefit of using authentic texts is that they 'construct experiences or 'content' in a non-trivial way which gives voice to complexities and subtleties not always present in other types of texts' (Carter and McRae, 1996: xxiv). So, by discussing linguistic choices, syntactic structures, rhetorical organization, tone and so on, students are trained to think not only about what the text means but also how the meaning is achieved, which leads to 'a heightened awareness of how language can mean, how its resources can be exploited to express different perspectives on familiar reality' (Widdowson, 1992: 32). Furthermore, studies in vocabulary acquisition have demonstrated that it is beneficial for students to meet words in a variety of contexts (Carter and McCarthy, 1988: 14), because the stylistic and associative meanings of words can only be seen when words are examined in context (Carter, 1998: 23).

Finally, if students want to continue to learn the language after completing their formal education, they will have to use the skills, strategies and habits they have acquired while learning the language in the classroom (Allen, 1983: 82). In a foreign language context reading authentic texts is one of the best options for language improvement. Therefore, offering learners opportunities to develop the necessary reading skills will equip them for autonomous and self-directed learning. In Barnett's words, 'authentic texts are vital; they motivate students, offer a real context, transmit the target language culture, and prepare students to read outside the classroom' (Barnett, 1989: 145).

4. Active involvement of learners

One of the benefits of using literature in the language classroom is that it encourages 'dynamic learning – learning which involves the students as actively and as personally as possible' (McRae, 1991: 8). Unlike referential texts that are usually found in FL textbooks, literary texts 'have potential for meaning' which can only be realised in the interaction between the text and the reader (Wallace, 1992: 39), a reading process which Nuttall describes as 'a do-it-yourself construction kit' (1982: 11). Language development cannot occur if students are only passive recipients of the teacher's input.

In order to make sense of the text, readers have to ask questions, make predictions, form hypotheses, use their imagination, background knowledge and personal experience until they arrive at a satisfactory interpretation, because 'the words on the paper remain mere words on paper until a reader actively engages with them as intellectually and as sensitively as his knowledge of life and his command of the language will allow' (Rodger, 1983: 46).

What is important is not the result of the interpretation but the processes involved in arriving at that interpretation. The ultimate goal is not understanding that particular text, but developing procedures for understanding similar texts that learners may choose to read outside the classroom. As interpretations of texts are influenced by psychological, cognitive, affective and social factors, each reader may arrive at different interpretations (Wallace, 1992: 43), which is a positive thing as it offers opportunities for negotiation and interaction between students. However, students should know that although their interpretations may differ, they should always justify their answer with close reference to the text (McRae, 1991: 98).

The active involvement of the learners in interpreting the text through noticing, inferencing, negotiation, interaction and imaginative involvement promotes language acquisition. Research has shown that 'mental activity has a powerful effect on memory' (Carter and McCarthy, 1988: 65) so that 'the more one manipulates, thinks about, and uses mental information, the more likely is that one will retain that information' (Schmitt, 2000: 121). Reading authentic texts can aid the process of language acquisition because 'it is a space for the exercise of mental energy; it

is a space for creativity; it is a space where the personal elements of interaction, involvement, concern and personality can all be accommodated' (McRae, 1991: 15).

5. Extensive reading

A valuable contribution of teaching literature is that it serves as a gateway to extensive reading which increases students' exposure to the target language. Nuttall remarks that 'the best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it' (1982: 168). Since the first option is not available to the majority of foreign language learners, teachers should try to make students read more outside the classroom by 'requiring them to do so' or 'tempting them to do so' (Nuttall, 1982: 168). If the books are well chosen, if students have developed good reading skills and strategies and if teachers share their love of reading with the students, the students will not feel that reading is another tedious task they have to do, but something that can bring them pleasure, enjoyment and personal satisfaction. Sinclair (1996: 142) argues that when teaching literature, the role of the teacher is to help students 'gradually develop the *capacity* for selecting English texts according to their own preferences and interests, as well as dealing with and understanding the language, discourse, style, form and contexts of these texts'.

Studies on the effect of extensive reading on language acquisition show that it 'can be a major factor for success in learning another language' (Nation, 1997). Benefits from extensive reading are numerous. The results from the studies in second/foreign language acquisition have demonstrated that learners can acquire vocabulary (Brown et al., 2008; Dupuy and Krashen, 1993; Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Horst et al., 1998; Pigada and Schmitt, 2006; Pitts et al., 1989; Waring and Takaki, 2003), they can improve their writing ability (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983) and grammar knowledge (Pagada and Schmitt, 2006). Furthermore, these studies have shown that reading can also increase learner's oral proficiency (Cho and Krashen, 1994), reading comprehension, reading speed and reading fluency (Day and Bamford, 1998; Mason and Krashen, 1997). One of the important findings is that reading can also bring affective gains as it promotes confidence and increases the motivation and positive attitude towards learning the target language (Cho and Krashen, 1994; Day and Bamford, 1998). Hedge (2000: 204) summarizes the benefits of extensive reading as follows: 'Learners can build their language competence, progress in their reading ability, become more independent in their studies, acquire cultural knowledge, and develop confidence and motivation to carry on learning'.

In order to introduce literature as early as possible, in the early stages of language learning students can read graded readers or specially written texts that will provide them with easily comprehensible reading material, catch their interest and spark their enthusiasm for reading. But as soon as they are able to read more difficult texts, simplified literary texts should be replaced with authentic literary texts. Reading authentic literary texts outside the classroom is highly desirable for foreign language learners because it increases the exposure to the target language, reveals unusual and unexpected uses of the language, stimulates language acquisition and provides a motivating and enjoyable way of learning the language.

6. Conclusion

Using literature as a resource offers teachers possibilities for basing language learning activities on materials that can stimulate greater interest and involvement than is the case with other texts (Carter and Long, 1991: 3). Duff and Maley (1990: 6) formulate three types of justification for using literary texts: linguistic, methodological and motivational. Linguistically, the use of literary texts is justified on the grounds that they 'offer genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers, and text-types at many levels of difficulty'. Methodologically, they offer opportunities for genuine interaction between learners because of their openness to multiple interpretations. Motivationally, they deal with matters that are likely to engage learners in a personal response from their own experiences.

Literary texts enrich the language input in the classroom and stimulate language acquisition by providing 'meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language' (Lazar, 1993: 17). The multiple levels of meaning of literary texts provide opportunities for developing inferential and interpretational skills that students need for understanding all kinds of representational materials. As literary language is patterned creatively

and 'words and structures are not intended to be read literally' (Carter, 1997: 59), the interpretation of literary texts involves students emotionally, awakens their imagination and creativity, and requires personal response and reaction.

Using literary texts in the language classroom can make the students more aware of the language they are learning, help them develop skills and strategies they can apply in many different situations and contexts, increase their interest and motivation, and make the learning of the language a more enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

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