

Using literary texts in language teaching

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Abstract. The writing reviews the potential value of using literary texts in language teaching, and criteria for the text selection and some positive gains, which helps English language teachers teach various skills for the first year students at the Department of English-American Language and Culture, University of Languages and International Studies, VNU. The discussion is of great importance in making the lessons more interesting and practical as it will effectively help students in developing their language skills, their inspiration in study and also their confidence and interaction with literary texts, which supplement the main objectives of the course. Also, the article presents pedagogic practices and several suggested activities which can be used for freshmen at the Department and in other language classrooms as well.

1. Introduction

The 1980 decade saw a remarkable revival of interest in literature in language courses. Many researchers claim that literature has created a fresh and impressive atmosphere in which never before have literary texts been as highly regarded as one of the most valuable resources available in EFL classrooms. In this article, the author has intention of sharing her own experience of using literature in teaching language skills for first year students in English Department, College of Foreign Languages - Vietnam National University (CFL-VNU). Also, some suggested activities are presented to support the practicality of exploiting literary texts in language teaching.

2. The potential value of using literary texts in language teaching

The idea of using literary texts in EFL classroom is supported by Sandra Mackay [1] whose paper examines thoroughly the pros and cons of using literature in an EFL classroom. The author argues that *"literature can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use level."* What is more, *"to the extent that the students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. It may also enhance students' understanding of a foreign culture and perhaps spur their own creation of imaginative works."*

Mortimer J. Adlert and Charles Van Doren [2] also give the reasons for using literary texts with classes, especially if there is no specific examination requirement to do

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so and little extra time available. The two authors claim that literature is valuable authentic material which offers "authentic" samples of language - for example, travel timetables, city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertisements, newspaper or magazine articles. Learners are thus *"exposed to language that is as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom context."* At least, literature can bring us a great deal of cultural information. Adlert and Doren share the same viewpoint with MacKay when claiming the vital role of literature in cultural enrichment and linguistic enrichment. However, these two authors stress upon the personal involvement that literature fosters in readers. Personal involvement can be understood as the readers' close contact with the characters or the engagement in the event of the story, the sharing of emotions and feelings between readers and characters, between readers and the author, and among readers themselves. Therefore, students would have a chance to learn through literary texts in the classroom and then improve their language awareness and cultural understanding. Also, they would be motivated in their learning process when they find themselves capable of giving their emotional responses. Personally, it would be most advantageous when using literary texts in teaching language, especially if the lessons are well planned and if teachers are skilled enough to monitor the class in an interesting and effective way.

Another reason for choosing literary texts is that curriculum and materials in the course can hardly satisfy the objectives of language teaching to first year students. Additionally, the fact that teaching separated skills in one lesson might not work so well encourages teachers to resort to literary texts sometimes

so as to give students a chance of developing overall foreign language competence. The major problems lie on which literary materials should be chosen and what the text selection criteria for EFL students are. Let's refer this to Gillian Lazar's point of view [3]. The first year students in CFL are mostly at lower levels, so they need to expand their language usage in English substantially and then expand their overall language awareness. Despite their very limited proficiency in the language, students also need *"the challenge and stimulation of addressing themes and topics which have adult appeal, and which encourage them to draw on their personal opinions and experiences."*

3. Criteria for the text selection and some positive gains

Tran Thi Nga [4] suggests several guidelines for selecting literary works and genres. In the first place, appropriateness should be taken into consideration. That is the difficulty of a text in terms of lexis, grammar, and style must relate to students' levels of command of English. From her own experience with pre-intermediate first year students, the researcher has found the poem "Dreams" by Langston Hughes to be quite suitable. What the students respond to the lesson took the author by a surprise. Second, teachers should help students overcome cultural barriers by informing students of specifically cultural aspects found in the texts to be used. Third, such factors as pleasure and enjoyment should also be taken greater notice of because they serve as "a motivating factor" which inspires readers/students to read, to be interested in reading and to interpret the works. Nga believes that teachers should take the position of their

students to ensure that the texts chosen will appeal to students.

Generally speaking, the author shares the same viewpoints with the researchers above. Nevertheless, the teaching objectives would be somewhat different. A stanza of a poem, for instance, might bring teacher and students an interesting way to drill the sounds /s/, /z/, /ʒ/ and ending sounds in a pronunciation lesson:

*And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.*

(The passionate shepherd to his love-Christopher Marlow)

Likewise, with a short story, teachers may take into account the use of linguistic items to help students revise the grammar first and then basing on the grammar focus to practise other language skills as speaking and writing. Certainly, learners' interpretive ability will also be paid attention to during the process. It might be rewarding because the level of difficulty is not too much above the students' normal reading proficiency and the content is both interesting and relevant to the students' background knowledge. This will encourage students to get personally involved in the text and build their own interpretation at a basic level. Speaking and writing, furthermore, offer them a chance to drill in the language and to express their output ability. Put it in another way, the text can give them valuable opportunities to use and develop such sub skills as deduction of meaning from linguistic and situational context, relating text to knowledge and

experience of the world, responding to text, creative writing, etc. Beside skill development, the story will also provide educational value, affective value, individual value and stimulus value as mentioned in Brian Tomlinson's article [5].

4. Pedagogic approach

Carter and Long (quoted in Zafeiriadou, [6]) describe the three main models related to specific pedagogic practices: *the cultural model*, *the language model* and *the personal growth model*. The first two models focus on the study of literature while *the personal growth model* puts an emphasis on the use of literature as a resource, aiming to the development of language competence and literary competence, being better expressed in terms of pleasure and personal fulfillment. Rather, this model aims to "*infuse a continuous love and appreciation of literary texts, which would continue beyond the classroom.*"

Furthermore, in this model, the teacher is suggested to play a role as an educator and an enabler for the transmission of knowledge rather than a traditional possessor of knowledge whose beliefs greatly impose on students. This is meant to motivate and enliven students in the classroom.

The lesson, therefore, might be designed into certain tasks. The structure of the task is composed of: i) specific goals or outcomes; ii) some input data (in the literary texts); and iii) one or more related activities or procedures. In other words, the task frame (Le Van Canh, [7]) is as the following:

Preparation:	Teacher (and sometimes students) prepare some suitable materials before hand
Pre-task (Warm-up):	To prepare students for the task, to engage their attention
Task:	To give students the chance to take part in the activities
Planning:	Students prepare their oral report of the task
Report:	Students present the report
Post-task activity:	For example, listening or exchanging the ideas among the groups
Language focus:	To raise students' awareness about target language
Language practice:	To give students some restricted written target language
Optional follow up:	To give students an opportunity to repeat (and hopefully improve) the task

A task, therefore, covers several skill areas, hardly just one, so Task-based teaching is a well-integrated approach to language teaching in general, and to the using of literary texts in teaching language skills in particular.

5. Suggested activities

There might be a variety of activities exploited from literary texts. However, the researcher focuses on the use of short stories to teach the language in an integrative lesson. Some practical suggestions should be considered as below:

a) Strong lines (Elisabeth B. Ibsen [8])

- Students are required to read a short story before hand. In the class, however, they are not allowed to look at the story when following this activity.

- In the class, teacher asks students to have a quick look at the whole story and underline "strong lines" that is the words and expressions that they like or that disturb them.

- Divide the class into groups of three or four and ask students to share the strong lines with other members in their group.

Note: When sharing "strong lines" in class, students may discover that they often select the same lines- that is, they all appreciate lines of good literary quality. In this way, the teacher can help students to identify good qualities in a literary text, which again can benefit their own writing.

- All the members in one group discuss and choose one "strong line" favoured by most members (they can vote if needed.)

- Use the "strong line" as the title or the topic for an expressive piece of writing. For example, write your comments on the sentence above.

(Note: All the group members are supposed to contribute to the group's project. The teacher may help students when they have difficulty in interpreting the title or the topic of their strong line.)

-Ask each group to report their project. Make a class exhibition if possible.

b) Storytelling

- Students are required to read the short story before hand.

- The teacher picks up 10-15 words from the passage. Write the words (in the sequence of occurrence in the text) on the board. For example,

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| 1. news | 6. knock |
| 2. killed | 7. gentle |
| 3. message | 8. blurted |
| 4. loitered | 9. nightgown |
| 5. farmhouse | 10. bang |

(The Corn Planting-Sherwood Anderson)

- Give students one minute to memorise the words.

- Cross out all the words. Ask students to rewrite the words in order within 1 minute.

- Check students' word list. Those who can write the most words are the winners. (Gifts should be available in this activity)

- Note: in fact, one effective way of memorising all the word is that students put the words in sentences related to the passage. If so, they can recall the content of the passage.

- Ask students to tell the content of the passage (they can work individually or in pair/group works), using the word lists. Then, ask them to write.

- Optional***: Ask students to use the word list to make up a new story. It would be more challenging if the teacher asks them to work in pairs and each pair creates 2 stories by using the words from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Students should make use of their imagination. For example:

Student A: "Last night, I got a terrible piece of news. My beloved pet bird got killed by a neighbour's fierce cat...."

Student B: "I was sleeping last night when I was suddenly woken up by a bang. I got out of my bed and went into the kitchen to see what happened. There I saw a stranger in a white nightgown..."

- Ask students to tell their stories (The class may choose the best stories). Ask them to write their own story as a home task.

c) Gap filling

- Students are required to read the story before hand. In the class, however, they are not allowed to look at the story when following this activity.

- Teacher prepares another copy of the text in which there are some gaps for the students to fill in. The gaps can be passive vocabulary, adjective vocabulary, etc so that students will have a chance to revise the lexis later.

- Ask students to fill in the gaps, exchange the answers in pair/group.

- Remind them of the related grammatical focus.

- Give them a chance to drill in the language/grammar if possible.

Example:

Teacher can leave out the relative pronouns (*who, which, where, when...*) or adjectives of describing the people (Later, ask students to use those adjectives to describe the characters in the story.)

d) Storylines (Allan Malley, [9])

- Students are not provided with the text before the lesson.

- From each part of the story, select one or two key sentences, that is, ones which give an indication of the storyline. Write out these sentences in order and make them up into a task sheet. If teacher wishes to make the activity slightly easier, he/she could also add the opening paragraph and the ending.

- Ask students to work in groups of three. Give each group a copy of the task sheet. Students discuss what they think happen in the story, and find a possible explanation for each of the sentences.

- The groups compare their different versions of the story

- Class discussion: Ask the class to call out those sentences from the story which they found most difficult to explain. Let them compare their suggestions. Finally reveal what actually happened in the story.

- Note: Although the activity is best suited to unfamiliar material, it can also be used as a form of memory test to refresh familiar texts, and it is particularly suitable for revising set works or texts which may feature in examination.

This activity helps to overcome one of the main difficulties of working with literature in class: how to deal with longer texts. Here, the students are in a sense of skimming through a longer text which they may read later on their own. Teacher will find out that the interest aroused is usually great and that, by the end of the activity, the students actually want to read the whole text. This eagerness to

know what happens is not easily aroused when students are simply asked to plod through the text page by page.

- Optional***: this activity can be modified into a Prediction Game. The teacher reads/plays the tape of a part of the story and stop to ask students to guess what the author is going to write about, what happens next. It would be most useful when students are asked to predict the ending. Later, they will have a chance to compare their works with the original texts. A Follow-up activity might be the oral summary of the story or another ending. If the students are greatly interested in the activity, then the teacher can ask them to write any part of the story in their own words, or change the plot at any part they like.

e) Creative writing (as Home Tasks)

Often, the home task should be a piece of creative writing. Teacher may ask students to write what they feel and respond after reading the story. This is some what like asking about their personal interpretation. Plot summarizing is also a good idea as Paula Willoquet Maricondi [10] states: "This assignment is both a record and an act of understanding." Another home task might be student's research on the author or their comments on some strong lines. For instance,

Comment on the last sentence of the story.

Create a new version from the ending of the story.

6. Conclusion

In this article, the author has just made an attempt to express her personal philosophy

for using literary texts in language learning classrooms, basing on her real working condition. It is undeniable that even when the texts are mainly used for skill development in the lessons, the holistic value of literature is to be discovered to the most possible extent as in Baurain's opinion: "Knowing what your students need, want, lack, and desire in their study of literature is a key of success." [11]

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Sử dụng ngữ liệu văn học trong giảng dạy các kỹ năng thực hành tiếng

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Bài viết trình bày giá trị tiềm năng của việc sử dụng ngữ liệu văn học trong giảng dạy các kỹ năng thực hành tiếng và các tiêu chí lựa chọn ngữ liệu văn bản phù hợp với chương trình ngoại khóa cho sinh viên năm thứ I Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh - Mỹ, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. Những phân tích này rất quan trọng trong việc góp phần xây dựng các bài học hấp dẫn hơn, giúp sinh viên phát triển các kỹ năng ngôn ngữ, tính tự giác trong học tập và cả sự tự tin và tương tác với các ngữ liệu văn học vốn vẫn thường được coi là khó tiếp cận. Bài báo cũng đưa ra các phương pháp giáo học pháp cơ bản và có tính ứng dụng nhất định, đồng thời cung cấp những hoạt động giảng dạy cụ thể đã được lựa chọn và áp dụng hiệu quả cho sinh viên năm thứ nhất của Khoa cũng như với một số đối tượng học viên khác.