

Using Literature in Teaching Basic Language Skills in the EFL Classroom

استخدام الأدب في تعليم المهارات اللغوية الأساسية في فصل اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract: Using literature in teaching English as a foreign language is considered as a necessity that goes with the needs of learners. Literature is rich in themes and linguistic devices that may help in teaching basic notions in the English language. In order to improve EFL students' language skills, teachers can have recourse to literary texts in the classroom. In planning their lessons, they may use literature to fulfill their teaching objectives, which are related to the basic language skills. Therefore, the present paper comes to show the importance of using literary texts in teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in the EFL classroom. Literature can aid EFL learners to improve their language skills. It is thus considered as a booster that teachers can have recourse to enhance their students' language abilities.

Key words: literature, teaching; English as a foreign language; learner; language skills.

الملخص: يعتبر استخدام الأدب في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ضرورة تتماشى مع احتياجات المتعلمين. فالأدب غني بالمواضيع والأساليب اللغوية التي قد تساعد في تدريس المفاهيم الأساسية في اللغة الإنجليزية. ومن أجل تحسين المهارات اللغوية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، يمكن للمدرسين اللجوء إلى النصوص الأدبية في الفصل الدراسي. فعند التخطيط لدروسهم، يمكنهم استخدام الأدب لتحقيق أهدافهم التعليمية المتعلقة بالمهارات اللغوية الأساسية. ولذلك تأتي هذه الورقة البحثية لإظهار أهمية استخدام النصوص الأدبية في تعليم مهارات القراءة والكتابة والاستماع والتحدث في فصل اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. يمكن للأدب أن يساعد متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على تحسين مهاراتهم اللغوية، ومن ثم فإنه يعتبر وسيلة مهمة يمكن للمدرسين اللجوء إليها لتعزيز القدرات اللغوية لطلابهم. الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب، التعليم، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، المتعلم، المهارات اللغوية.

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1. Introduction

Literature can be used in teaching the main language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. When having recourse to literature in the EFL classroom, it is recommended that skills should not be taught in isolation, but in an integrated way. Literature is a good source teachers can rely on to plan their lessons and to achieve their teaching objectives. The objective of this paper is to investigate the impact of using literature in teaching English as a foreign language. Throughout the present study, we will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How can the use of literature help EFL instructors in teaching the four language skills?

2. Literature and Reading

EFL teachers could apply a learner-centered approach towards the comprehension of any literary text (Lazar, 2007). The frequently raised questions on reading literary works in the EFL classroom are on settings, characters and plot, which can be replied, referring to the text. When learners get the literal understanding, they can move to the inferential level, where they must make their own interpretations of the target text and the message the writer wants to convey (Durant et al, 2000).

After grasping a literary text at the literal and inferential levels, students can exchange their evaluations of the work and their own reactions to it. This is also the appropriate time for them to share their own reactions to the text's cultural values (Dugan, 1997). The personal level makes learners think imaginatively about the tackled literary work and it provokes their problem-solving capabilities (Boyle & Hirvela, 1988). The debate deriving from such discussions can be the groundwork for any oral and written tasks (Stern, 1991).

3. Literature and Writing

Literary texts, as a model and as a subject matter, are considered as a source for writing in the EFL class (Spack, 1985). Literature can be a model if students sometimes try to imitate the literary work's content or style. However, when students' writings exhibit original thinking like interpretations or analysis, or when they are creatively stimulated by the reading, literature serves as a subject matter (Collie & Slater, 1990). Any literary text is rich in different themes that can be used in any classroom activity for guided or free writings.

3.1 Literature as a Model for Writing

Controlled writing, guided writing and reproducing the model are considered as the three main kinds of writing that can be based on literature as a model (Spack, 1985).

For beginners in writing, controlled model-based activities can be used since they necessitate rewriting passages in different arbitrary ways to practice particular grammatical structures. For example, EFL learners may take the role of reporters making a live newscast, or they may rewrite a third person text using the first person narrator from a character's point of view.

These sorts of activities fit intermediate levels in learning EFL. Students can answer a set of questions or complete a number of sentences which, when put together, go over the model. In some situations, students can complete the exercise after receiving the first sentences of a description. Guided writing activities, mainly at the literal level, allow students to comprehend the target literary work. Both model approach and scenario approach are useful in this case (Bock, 1993).

Those activities also include some techniques such as paraphrasing and summarizing (Carter & McRae, 1999). They are so important to improve students' writing skills in the EFL classroom. In paraphrasing activities, students are often asked to use their own words to rephrase the meanings of words that they see in print. Summaries can be on novels, short stories and plays, where events follow a chronological order and have important elements like plot, setting and characters to

direct students' writings (Lazar, 2007). Such activities allow students to know the variations between the written English and the spoken one (Stern, 1991).

3.2 Literature as a Subject Matter for Writing

EFL teachers of writing sometimes find it challenging to choose appropriate materials for their classes since writing as a course has no subject matter of its own (Boyle & Peregoy, 1993). If literature is the reading content of the course of writing, its readings become the subject matter for most students' paragraphs or essays (Carter & McRae, 1999). In this case, EFL learners can build their own ideas and make conclusions. Accordingly, they can improve the way they think creatively and critically. This helps them in other courses, which need critical thinking and deep analyses of texts (Spack, 1985). There are essentially two types of writing based on literature as a subject matter: writing 'about' literature, and writing 'out of' literature. These two kinds are helpful for any EFL class.

3.2.1 Writing 'About' Literature

Writing about literature includes traditional tasks such as written answers to particular questions, paragraph writing, in-class essays and assignments in which students are asked to analyse the literary work, focusing on themes, characters or

stylistic features. Writing about literature may sometimes be before students begin reading the target work (Roberts, 1988).

The literary text's themes are often tackled in the EFL classroom, and students are usually asked to write down their own reflections on them, taking into account their own real-life situations. This activity can build students' interest in the target work and it thus makes them prepared for writing about it. Writing assignments may take various forms, including direct questions to be answered, general statements to be discussed or a number of issues to be debated (Carter & Long, 1991).

3.2.2 Writing 'Out of Literature

Considering the literary work as a springboard leads to some creative assignments about its plot, settings, characters, themes and stylistic devices (Collie & Slater, 1990). There are many forms of writing out of literature, such as adding sections to the work, changing the plot, drama-inspired writings and drafting a letter addressed to a particular character (Spack, 1985). Adding to the literary work refers to writing imaginary continuations, or in the case of drama it is related to filling in scenes for off-stage actions that are met in the dialogue.

EFL students may create new endings of the literary works they study by contrasting the writers' endings to their own, altering the plot as a whole. For instance,

short stories can be rewritten as a whole or in parts from the point of view of a certain character.

The EFL teacher can design drama-inspired writing activities from plays, short stories, novels and poetry. The learner comes closer to the consciousness of a character and writes about his outlooks and feelings. He can write a letter to one of the characters, in which he advises the character about the way he may have recourse to in order to settle a particular issue (Stern, 1991).

4. Teaching Speaking and Listening through Literature

It is known that literature in EFL classes can be used to teach reading and writing skills, and it also plays an important role in teaching both speaking and listening. To tackle a given literary work, activities like role-playing, oral reading and dramatization can be used by the EFL teacher inside the classroom (Collie & Slater, 1990).

Moody (1971) maintains that literature can help EFL students to improve their listening skills. The richness of themes in literary works makes a chance for discussions, which may encourage learners' oral practice (Spack, 1985). A literary work can be read out in full or in parts by the teacher, or a record version of it can be played for bringing out its rhythmic quality and creating interest. Therefore, when it is utilized in the oral form, literature can develop EFL learners' listening skills.

a- Oral Reading

EFL teachers can play a video clip or an audio-recording of the literary work to be discussed, or they may read it loudly themselves so that they can make listening comprehension interesting for their students (Lazar, 2007). These techniques may contribute to developing the learners' speaking and listening skills. They can improve their pronunciation in English (Moody, 1971).

b- Drama

Literature-based dramatic activities are generally used in teaching English as a foreign language. They can help in the development of oral skills since they encourage students to comprehend the chosen text's plot and characters (Gill, 1996). Despite the fact that drama may take different forms inside the classroom, there are still three common forms, which are dramatization, improvisation and role-playing (Bock, 1993).

Performance of scripted materials inside the classroom is needed in dramatization (Lazar, 2007). EFL learners can create their own scripts for literary texts, adapting them to the real story. They have to think of what characters would say and how they would say it. They ought to read carefully the assigned sections of dialogues in advance and be able to answer any questions about the story plot and characters. They should also highlight the vocabulary they cannot comprehend and the words they

cannot pronounce. After that, they will be able to prepare the required scenes in an excellent way.

Both improvisation and role-playing can be developed around themes, plot and characters of a literary text (Gill, 1996). Improvisation which is a dramatization without any script is a systematic activity. There is often a certain plot with an opening phase, middle, and an ending scene in improvisation (Lazar, 2007). Nevertheless, learners in role playing depict characters from the literary work being read and make speaking activities, such as panel discussions or interviews.

c- Group Activities

Group activities promote full participation and make each learner in charge of facts to be tackled (Collie & Slater, 1990). All learners in this case are engaged, and the participation will be multidirectional. When teaching the English language through literature, general class discussions, small-group works and debates are some of the group activities used in the classroom (Lazar, 2007). All of these activities develop the speaking skills of students and they value pronunciation practice (Stern, 1991).

4. Conclusion

In short, literature is considered as a means to teach EFL learners basic English language skills. The present paper attempted to show how teachers could have recourse to literary texts to teach listening, speaking, reading and writing. Different activities that

are based on literary texts can be designed to improve EFL students' language skills. Therefore, using literature in the classroom is strongly recommended and it may be a golden opportunity for enhancing students' level in English.

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