Use of literature in teaching English

Abdollah Keshavarzi *

* Department of English language, Firoozabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Firoozabad, Iran

Abstract

Teachers in general and English teachers specifically, are always concerned with the kind of material they are going to present to their students. One of the most challenging kinds of material for English classes is literature. Although some scholars have pointed out to the shortcoming of literature use in practice, it is so vast and so practicable that instructors cannot stop using it. Language learning requires acquiring four skills of reading comprehension, writing, listening and speaking. Some sources provide materials that can meet some of these abilities, but literature has proved a good source that fulfills these four skills. Also, language learning deals with culture, and hence with social understanding. It is this feature of language that demands materials dealing with culture. Literature is culture; that is, it is not to say that literature deals with culture, but it should be said that literature is the culture of the people using that language. Besides, it can be claimed that the use of literature in language classes encourages more thoughtful and purposeful language learning. In this respect, the learners are not only exposed to the real use of language, but also they become critical thinkers. As such, the present paper will debate the reasons behind using literature as a good source in teaching English language.

Keywords: Literature, English language, Culture, Language four skills;

1. Introduction

Choosing appropriate texts is the first step to teaching English in the ESL/EFL classroom. All language teachers desire to provide their students with materials inspiring them to speak up, to seek out answers to questions, to voice their questions, and to read widely as well as deeply. An important goal of education is equipping learners with materials to improve their own futures and become contributing members of their own society, rather than burdens on society and others. English language teachers are absolutely aware of this goal. Therefore, they attempt to create such a situation for students of English language by selecting materials which leads to students' and their societies' improvement. A vast part of this material comes from literature.

Nowadays, the number of students flowing into classrooms in English-speaking countries is rapidly increasing. The studies of Eddy, 1990; Derwing, De Corby, Ichikawa, & Jamieson, 1999; Gunderson, 2004, 2007: and Watt & Roessingh, 1994, 2001 all conclude that educational institutions should do their best to seize the opportunity of this rapid increase in the numbers of students flowing into classrooms in English-speaking countries around the world. This emphasis on seizing this opportunity requires more attention from the teachers' side on their
material selection. They have to select those materials which absorb learners and make them contributing members of their societies. It is here that literature introduces itself to lead these teachers in their own right track.

Of course, it is often believed that literature has some special features that make it unfit to be the source of material for English courses. Claudia Ferradas (2009), along with other believers, claims that literature "has little practical application, is often closely connected with a specific cultural context, and it can be idiosyncratic, even subversive" (27). Yet, other scholars have found out the practicality of literature in practice. The best signifier of the point is what is called "BritLit" project in Spain. BritLit (British Literature) project was launched in Spain, Catalonia. It is associated with Catalan Teachers of English Association, (Associacio' de Professors d'Angle's de Catalunya, or APAC). "BritLit has already earned itself a reputation in classrooms and amongst teachers in a number of countries, within and outside Europe. It has helped teachers from around the world to exploit English literature in the ELT classroom as a language tool" (Denham & Figueras, 2009: 9). BritLit is not the only project employing literature in English classrooms. There are a lot of online services which provide English instructors and students with literary texts and encourage them teaching and learning English through literature. The point is that language teachers are regarded as carriers of cultural messages, and understanding a language necessitates understanding its culture. In other words, an appreciation of certain key cultural concepts is required for a true understanding of the language being learnt.

Since the mid-1980s, much attention has been paid within TESL to language and content instruction, and the studies of Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Christie, 1992; Crandall, 1987; Early, Thew, & Wakefield, 1986; Early & Hooper, 2001; Mohan, 1986; Short, 1994; and Davison & Williams, 2001 all have been concerned with the lexical, syntactic, genre, and knowledge-structure demands of discourse approaches of language learning, but the structures of knowledge underlying texts to support students’ learning of subject-matter cannot be ignored. Literature seems to be the source of knowledge underlying texts to support students' learning English.

2. Discussion

Using literature in the ESL and EFL classrooms has benefits in several main areas. Literature is beneficial to language development. It is a good resource of accurate diction, diverse sentence patterns, and passionate narratives (Ghosn, 2002). Since literature is related to real-life situations, it deals with accurate diction. The language employed in literature is the language of its audience, so it cannot be inaccurate. Also, since literature deals with different moods as well as situations, it is prevalent with diverse forms of sentences. Actually, different people talk and write differently. As such, literature contains all these various forms of use of language. Besides, passion has its own value in literature. When reading literature texts, the reader is engaged with this passionate aspect of the text. Engagement is generally thought of as a key component of learning environment, especially learning English language. This engagement is created especially through conflict prevailing literary works. Of course, conflict is not only present in narrative forms; it exists in all literary works, even in a short poem, as the poet creates a situation in which the reader encounters conflict in understanding what the poet means. What is important is that conflict resolution and communication strategies are best mediums to create learning environment for engagement. Kolonder & Guzdial, (1990); and Schank, (1990) believe that human knowledge is largely composed of an index of stories, personal narratives, and first- and second-hand experiences that we draw on and reuse as they are found to be relevant to the situation at hand. As such, the significance of literature in promoting English learners is beyond doubt as they bring knowledge to them. It, in fact, gives them second-hand problem solving experiences.

Reading literature enhances ESL students’ knowledge of culture and society. This knowledge is not gained easily through other sources; it is too complicated to be captured by any single piece of expository writing. Language is associated with culture. That is, language is the carrier of cultural messages. As such, literature is very significant when employed in teaching a language. Literature is culture. Narrations are often built upon the perspective of one main character who is experiencing the pains of growing up. This makes reading literary texts a drastically different experience from that of reading explanatory articles, the most commonly seen type of literature in ESL reading. Undoubtedly, "the English curriculum is a place for enjoying and reflecting on . . . cultural resources, debating their values, and imagining and designing . . . futures" (Goodwyn, 2009: 12). In this way,
literature prepares good source and context to contextualize these activities. A good story book not only informs ESL students the situation and development of an event; it also connects readers to the event to gain an insight, rather than an overview, of English culture and society. English teachers should acquaint themselves with language use to develop their own competence and understand language as a social phenomenon, and not just as an exclusive branch of learning. It is literature that creates this acquaintance in English teachers. As the teachers find out this point, they transform the classrooms as the stage in which there is real practice of communicative language. In other words, teachers should consider language as entailing social acceptability; that is, they should look to English classroom as carrying resemblance with the outside language. Besides, non-native students need to be exposed to various literary texts in order to be able to consider the others' culture in their international communication. Therefore, the non-native learners' curriculum should include teaching literary texts or literature to facilitate such international communication for the students. Literary texts explore the lives of English speaking people and their feelings toward some cultural clichés. By connecting religion, superstition and folktales together; that is, by culture, students explore hidden facets of English speaking culture. By sharing their reading experiences, students realized how differently people approach and respond to the same literary work. Through their approaches to literary texts, students find the social and historical contexts of the event and become familiar with culture. The piece of literary work entertains and opens the eyes of students as they see how other people think, interpret, and act on a variety of things, especially those things that ESL students are familiar with.

The emphasis on inner speech in learning a language reveals the importance of literature in acquiring a foreign language. Inner speech is actually "internalized social speech," it is "the most powerful tool of thought mediation." In fact, this theory believes that "children first engage in and then internalize the verbal practices of the community" (de Guerrero, 2005: xii). Literature is a good source for English language learners to develop inner speech. It is literature that provides them the source for internalization of various verbal practices of the community, and the learner is enabled to "think words" and to be engaged in mental rehearsal and internal self-talks. Therefore, literature encourages more thoughtful and purposeful language learning. It exposes the learners to the real use of language. Actually, literature helps in transition from teacher-centered English classrooms to student-centered ones as learners have to work in groups. In fact, literature enables students to work productively in teams and it is the learning goal of a great deal of teaching programs. McGee (1996) believes that group conversations about literature give students insights and understandings that they cannot create alone. In their group working, they have to both share their perception and support and negotiate their opinions with each other, the point which increases their level of reasoning and critical thinking.

In use of literature, it is not a matter of help, but a matter of force which signifies students' understanding. Literature forces them to read more and more as well as deeply. In order to understand the piece of the material in front of them, they have to read it again and again and to think deeply about all its parts to find out the interrelation within each part. Literature helps in incorporation of linguistic competence into communicative competence by putting language into use in different social situations. Literary texts, especially short stories, provide teachers and learners of English with a lot of pre-reading and post-reading activities, the ones which stimulate the learners' imagination and results in their creativity. Even after a long time, these activities remain with the learners as they try to remember the incidents of the story and the way they predicted them to happen.

Use of literature in English classrooms makes the learners focus on the meaning (Mourão, 2009). In this sense, language becomes a means for its own real function. It is not just a means for practice. Language becomes a means in the hands of learners and manipulated by them to use their background knowledge to understand authentic texts, or as Mourão (2009) calls it, to fill "the information gap" (17). Mourão goes on saying that through the use of literature, the focus is "on process rather than product", the emphasis is on "negotiation rather than pre-determination", and the teacher "acts as facilitator" and "not just instructor" (17). The significant point is that literature provides learners with texts which are above the level of their production/understanding. This aspect of literature is in accordance with Krashen's acquisition-based methodology; that is, input +1 theory. In fact, literature helps students to improve their reading comprehension of English. They give chance to the students as well as teachers to set various forms of questions based on their contents. Through these questions, students become fluent speakers and writers. Literary texts enable teachers to use different forms of questions to evaluate students'
comprehension, such as completion, true or false, matching and discussion forms. Literature develops learners' strategies; they listen and read for general meaning, predict and guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. Since, when discussing about the contents of the subject matter, they have to verbalize their own thoughts, they develop higher levels of thinking skills. Also, their frequent engagement with words reinforces students' tendency to induce meaning from the contexts in which they appear. Memorizing words from a dictionary is a futile and exhausting job. It results in failure and monotony. Literary texts provide us with a lot of opportunity to learn effectively to use words in different contexts. Literature helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings; that is, it enables students to go beyond what is written and dive into what is meant.

The subject matter or context is an important element in the process of language learning. If the subject matter is uninteresting and stale, it will not inspire and stimulate learners. Literature provides the kind of subject matter that has the power to motivate learners and help them in exploring the possibilities of usages and meaning that enhances their language competence in a great way. Since the literary texts explore the resources of language to its highest capacity, the learner therefore, is inspired through the reading of the literary texts to learn language in real life situations and communicate fluently. Mechanical and traditional language teaching reduces learners to imitative and unmotivated speakers and writers. Literature evokes feelings through words, pulls learners out of the graded grammatical forms and helps them to communicate in a way that attracts language learning. Once the student reads a literary text, he begins to inhabit the text. He dives into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes significant but pursuing the development of the story is much more important. The student is much more concerned to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. It is here that the selection of a literary text in relation to the needs, expectations, interests, and language level of the students becomes significant. In this process, he can remove the identity crisis and develop into an extrovert. Actually, literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting, as they are part of the human experience, and treats them in ways designed to engage the readers' attention. As such, they become a source of interest for English students.

A main factor of learning process is the promotion of reflective thinking in the learner. A reflective process, or reflective thinking, is considered a critical component of transformative learning for learners (Kember et al., 1999; Mezirow, 1991). Literary texts are good means to create suitable environments for English students to go through reflective thinking to see why the things are the way they see them, or why things are different from their expectations, or why they are different from the others they encounter in literature. This way, learners reflect on their own experiences and compare how their experiences are similar to or different from their expectations. Of course, during this reflecting process, they engage emotionally, and this emotional engagement helps them a lot to perceive the situation far better. This better perception is of much worth in learning the language. They learn the language as they are engaged with other aspects of learning. It can be said that they acquire the English knowledge, just as children acquire their native language. When acquiring his native language, a child's attempt is not learning the language. He uses the language to communicate with his elders, to satisfy his demands, to attract the others, and to interact with those around himself. Literature creates exactly the same environment for the English learner. His main focus is on how to interact with the situation he encounters, and through this interaction, he develops his knowledge of English.

3. Conclusion

Unfortunately, much of the material that is used in English curriculum lacks passion, intellectual excitement, and fun. Literary texts are meaningful, authentic, and relevant to learners' lives. They yield greatest opportunity for engagement, reflection, and hence, learning exists in them. Literature is intellectually stimulating because it allows a reader to imagine worlds they are not familiar with. This is done through the use of descriptive language. In order to understand, the reader will create his vision of what the writer is saying. In this sense, the reader becomes a performer or an actor in a communicative event as he reads. Literature-based programs focus on personal interpretation of the language so students begin to experiment with the language and incorporate this into their
everyday speech and vocabulary. Therefore, literary texts help them to acquire the language as a means of communication. This literature would make them native-like speakers because grammar is acquired implicitly, therefore, it is very important for making teaching English based on use and function-focus. Teachers of language should try to understand that the importance and effectiveness of teaching language lies in its spontaneous and impressive use by the learners. As Obediat (1997) states, literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners. English students, those studying literary texts, are reading a version of the language which is rich in metaphor, simile, allusion and ambiguity, and these are the elements which deepen their thinking and understanding of the material they are reading as well as English language. When English is taught through literature, it creates the power of self-belief in students, and hence, influences learner's behaviors, motivation and attitudes towards English language learning. Undoubtedly, learners' self-beliefs form the psychological basis that connects together and underlies learners’ interpretation of their experiences, their behaviors, motivations, affective reactions and future goals. As such, it is recommended to teach English through literature to create self-belief in the student.

References


