

Literature and Young Learner in an EFL Situation

¹Mohammad Khatib , ²Mojdeh Mellati

¹Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

²Education and Development Center, Islamic Azad University, Tehran Medical Branch, Tehran, Iran

*Corresponding author: mojdehmellati@yahoo.com

Abstract: The learning of English as a foreign language by young learners has become quite popular nowadays. Starting younger may not bring automatic improvement to language standards (Cameron, 2003). Many English textbooks taken into the classroom by the instructors are dry, with quite a lot of grammar exercises and passages planned for reading, which do not have any connection with the learners' everyday lives and interests. Therefore, learners experience English classrooms as boring and with no use (Bahrani, 2012). The use of literature as a method for teaching language skills is quite common within the domain of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays. The idea of working from something not abstract, such as art, to something abstract like language, helps learners to make connection in the field of their own experiences (Gorjian, Alipour, & Saffarian, 2012). Its purpose is to give pleasure, to teach or to instruct i.e. to give an enjoyable experience (Sharma, 2012). The present study mentions the use of literature in language teaching to the young.

Key words: young learner; literature teaching; foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

Literature is the way life is imagined and thought. It is the way through which people, around the world, at all times contact each other to collect the gathered wisdom of human experience. It is also the way through which people can communicate with future. By teaching literature, one can recognize the special claim about the future as well as the desire to share the past. Literature has the ability to take readers out of their world into other worlds (Purves, 1992). Along the same line, it is plausible to claim literature provides an undeniable contribution in EFL teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Young Learner

The term young learner refers to students of pre-primary and primary school age (Richards & Schmidt, 1985). The development of the area that accounts for language learning has been observed to begin when children are about 6 years old and continue until the onset of puberty. After puberty, the developmental rate of the language area decreases dramatically (Gordon, 2007). In France, Sweden and Holland, various experiments with groups of children starting English from ages between 7 and 9 years old showed that devoted teachers using oral methods could achieve excellent results, particularly in pronunciation, with little or no effort (Broughton et al, 1978).

Moreover, most school researches have determined that starting a foreign language at the age of 8–9 on the one hand does not fail to catch 'the teachable moment', and on the other gives time for the basic mother tongue skills to be firmly developed (Broughton, 1978).

The nature of the very young learner does not seem to vary much from one nation to another, and this suggests that the same general psychological and methodological principles hold good for teachers of the youngest children wherever they are (Broughton et al, 1978).

As Shakouri (2012) mentions that teacher is mostly a facilitator and a fellow learner beside the students. It is also mentioned that teachers of young learners have two jobs. First, they have to provide care and second, instruction. In order to provide the best instructional experience, the teacher needs to adjust the educational experiences in accordance with the developmental stages of the individual child (Linse, 2005).

In order to explain younger learners' overall success, Pinter(2011) argues that younger learners typically enjoy special social support such as the advantages of a supportive environment, unlimited access to easy, clarified input, good educational opportunities and cooperative classmates. All these factors help in facilitating successful language acquisition at a young age. In order to provide the young learners with the mentioned educational opportunities in many KYL materials, language is presented in short parts (Arnold & Rixon, 2008).

The students actually listen to the teacher while she is using the target language communicatively from the beginning of instruction. They do not speak at first. The teacher helps the students to understand her by using a few words in the students' native language and by being as expressive as possible. It is thought that if the teacher uses language that is just in accordance with the students' current level of proficiency, while making sure that the input is comprehensible, acquisition will proceed easily (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

2.2 Literature Stance

During the beginning years of the twentieth century, learning a foreign language meant a close study of the canonical literature in that language (Carter, 2007). From 1940s to 1960s, literature disappeared from the language teaching field (Carter, 2007), and it was almost ignored in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) until the publication of McRae and Boardman in 1984 (cited in Mc Rae & Clark, 2006).

Literature has been absent in the EFL classes for a very long time, but now it has returned after all. In approaches such as functional, notional, and structural there seemed to be no place for literature, but since it is present in so many texts nowadays it seems difficult to ignore it (Gilroy, 1995).

Literature in this article is not the traditional idea of literature or the 'finest', 'most beautiful' and 'best' literary gains of a society. Traditionally literature at its best and most beautiful aspect has not played any major role in English language teaching (Howatt, 1984; Stern, 1983). Throughout this study, literature does not refer to the traditional aspect, Shakespeare or the English classics. What is meant by 'literature' in this article is, as defined by McRae in his book 'Literature with a small l' (1991, cited in Choo, 2005, p.29), "any text, whose imaginative content will stimulate reaction and response in the receiver". To the authors, a good piece of literature text to be used in the classroom would be one that is open to many interpretations or in other words is subjective, implicit (i.e. the meaning is not so clear), and which stimulates a refine sense of taste in the reader (where the reader experiences the text and is influenced by it). However, it should have the capability to engage the reader (Choo, 2005).

According to McRae, working with literature opens up new approaches for language and literary learning. He claims that in an L2-context, literature enables stronger intellectual and emotional entanglement than entirely referential language learning materials. Taking into consideration literary learning, he claims that a switch to the small 'l'-category enables the inclusion of materials which have an impressionable influence on young people in their everyday lives (e.g. fairy-tales, TV series, films, or songs). Moreover, a methodology which is more learner-friendly can be introduced with the help of this division (Delanoy, 2005).

On the other hand, Literature with capital 'L' includes established academic critical practices which may focus on specialist interests of some of the students but not those of the majority of student groups. When students are not interested in such approaches, they may lose interest in literature completely. On the other hand, McRae's small-'l'-approach indirectly suggests a mischievous text-methodology as already used in communicative language learning (e.g. working with disarranged texts, writing a continuation, leaving gaps in texts, etc.). In his view, such a methodology enables a high amount of learner involvement and an experiential approach to text analysis (Delanoy, 2005). Literature with small 'l' includes advertisements, newspaper headlines, articles, jokes, puns, songs etc. (Tasneen, 2010).

Today, the role of literature as a major component and source of authentic texts of the language program instead of an ultimate goal of English instruction has been acquiring a strength and motivation. Among language instructors, there has been an argument as how, when, where and why literature should be included in ESL / EFL program. Various discussions of how literature and ESL / EFL instruction can work together and interact for the advantage of students and teachers has led to the development of interesting ideas, and placed learning as an interesting and worthy concern (Sage 1987, cited in Alhemiary, 2011).

The use of literature as a method for teaching basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and other language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) is quite common within the domain of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays. Moreover, in translation courses, many language teachers appoint literary translation pieces like drama, poetry and short stories to the students to be translated into the mother tongue (Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

2.3 Advantages of Using Literature

Ur (1996, p.201) lists some of the advantages of literature as a language teaching resource, which can be summarized in the following way:

1. Literature is a very enjoyable resource to learn a language.
2. Literature provides examples of different styles of writing, and also representations of various authentic uses of the language.
3. Literature is a good resource for increasing word power.
4. It encourages developing various reading skills in learners.
5. It can be used as a springboard for exciting discussion or writing.
6. It involves both emotions and intellect, which adds to the motivation and may contribute to the personal development of the student.

7. English literature (in general) is a part of the target culture, and therefore it has a value as part of the learners' general education.

8. It encourages critical and creative thinking.

9. It enriches the students' world knowledge.

10. It makes the students aware of various human situations and conflicts.

According to Vethamani (2004, cited in Rashid, 2010, p.88), one of the aims of combining literature in an English language program is "to help students improve their language skills (especially reading) and also to experience both education and pleasure when reading literary texts". Therefore, literature can be used to improve language proficiency (Lazar, 1993 as cited in Rashid, 2010).

However, Collie and Slater (1987), mention that because literary language is short and to the point, it is aesthetically satisfying, and therefore has the power of being memorized, showing a traditional reason for teaching literature which is as a model of good writing as rhetoric (Gilroy and Parkinson, 1996).

Chan (1999 cited in Rashid, 2010) further argues that literature is an illustration of various registers, genres, text-types, narrative structures, point of view, patterning of words and sounds.

Therefore, if literature is integrated in FLT it prepares the way for equipping students with a number of skills including development of critical thinking, analytical skills, formulating and expressing independent opinions, presenting one's own interpretations independently, improving language competence, such as reading, speaking and writing skills. Most importantly students are provided with an opportunity to expand their horizons, understand other cultures – providing a platform for cross-cultural understanding and intercultural communication (Premawarhena, 2007).

2.4 Disadvantages of Literature in the Language Classroom

During the past few years, there has been much discussion on the importance of using literature as a language teaching resource (O'Sullivan, 1991). By the way, O'Sullivan mentions two major difficulties of literature in language. First, linguistic difficulty of the text is one of the major shortcomings against using literature in the language classes. On the other hand, learners may need a lot of background knowledge about English language and culture to be able to understand some texts.

2.5 Selecting Suitable Literary Texts

In order to select the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account the needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students. By the way, one major factor to take into account is to ask oneself

whether a particular work is able to display personal involvement by stimulating the learners' interest and eliciting strong, positive reactions from them. Reading a literary text will probably have a long-term and valuable effect upon the learners' linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge when it is meaningful and amusing. It is important to choose books that are relevant to the real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner. The level of language difficulty has to be taken into account as well. When the language of the literary work is simple, it may facilitate the comprehensibility of the literary text, but this is not by itself the most crucial criterion. Interest, plea, and relevance are also important. Enjoyment and pleasure showed clearly in a work of art; and equal pleasure of noticing those same thoughts, feelings, emotions, or situations presented by a completely new perspective are all motives that help learners to cope with the linguistic obstacles that might be considered too great in less involving material (Collie and Slater 1990, cited in Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, one of the main ideas of using literary texts in the classroom is to "expose" the learner to as much real language as possible. By the way, learning of English as a foreign language by young learners has become quite popular nowadays. Starting at a younger age may not bring automatic improvement to language standards unless teacher education and language teaching both are in accordance with the new situation (Cameron, 2003).

Language teachers of young children have a much broader responsibility than mere teaching of a language system; they need to take into account the education of the whole child when planning their teaching program. At the heart of this responsibility is that classroom activities should be selected according to systematic criteria. According to Phillips (1993) some of the points which should be kept in mind while designing the activities for children (aged 5-12 years) in the language classroom using literary texts as the material, are as follows:

1. The activities should not be complex. They should easily understand what is expected of them.
2. The task should not be outside their abilities: it needs to be attainable but at the same time sufficiently stimulating for them to feel satisfied with their work.
3. The activities should be mostly oral based (reading aloud, recitation so on). Indeed, with young children activities regarding listening skill will take up a large part of class time.
4. Written activities should be used at a minimum amount with younger children.

Activities such as games and songs with actions, total physical response activities, tasks that involve coloring, cutting and pasting, simple, repetitive stories, and simple, repetitive speaking activities that have an obvious communicative value are among the most useful activities used for children at this age (Tasneen, 2010).

Therefore, Phillips (1993) provides an intellectual guideline for language teachers of children learners in the

area of setting criteria for selection of classroom activities to be done with literary texts. In this regard the activities should address the following characteristics:

1. The activities should not be mostly about discussion of the literary text than reading comprehension questions.
2. They should focus on the text as a whole rather than on the details.
3. They should develop cultural awareness in the students.
4. They should develop language awareness in the students
5. The activities should not need too much of any specific kind of background knowledge.
6. The teacher should provide a guideline to understand literature, for instance in classroom activities.
7. The students should feel free during the activities to "have a go in English". As children develop they bring more intellectual, motor, and social skills with them to the classroom, and also they gain a wider knowledge of the world they live in (Tasneen, 2010).

3. Conclusion

The necessity of introducing literary texts in the language classroom is an established fact. When literary texts are to be used, it is important to take into consideration a few points. Choosing the literary text and appointing suitable activities are among the most important. Therefore, in order to teach a new language to young learners it is important to take into consideration the text, learner, and the activities i.e. the difficulty level of the text, the ability of the learner, and using oral procedures. Oral procedures should precede writing activities, and these activities should be kept to minimum.

References

- [1] Alhemiary, A.. *The use of literature in teaching English as a foreign language* (2011). Retrieved on August 16, 2012 from <http://www.oppapers.com/essays/The-Use-Of-Literature-In-Teaching/654266>
- [2] Arnold, W. & Rixon, S. Materials for teaching English to young learners. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *English language learning materials: A critical review*. London, Library of Congress, (2008).
- [3] Bahrani, T. Language input and second language acquisition. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, 1(2), (2012), 221-223. Retrieved on September 6, 2012 from <http://worldsciencepublisher.org/journals/index.php/AASS>
- [4] Broughton, G. , Brumfit, C. , Flavell., R., Hill, P. & Pincas, A. *Teaching English as a foreign language* (2nd ed.). Routledge, (1978).
- [5] Cameron, L. *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2003).
- [6] Carter, R. Literature and language teaching 1986-2006: A review. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), (2007), 3-13.
- [7] Choo, L.M. A case for using literature to teach business English. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 4, (2005), 27-45.
- [8] Delanoy, W. A dialogic model for literature teaching. *ABAC Journal*, 25 (1), (2005), 53-66.
- [9] Gilroy, M. An Investigation into Teachers' Attitudes to Using Literature in the Language Classroom. In *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*; n6, (1995), p1-17.
- [10] Gilroy, M. and Parkinson, B. 'State of the Art Articles - Teaching Literature in a Foreign Language'. *Language Teaching*, 29(4), (1996) , 213-225.
- [11] Gordon, T. *Teaching young children a second language*. Westport, Connecticut: London, (2007).
- [12] Gorjan, B., Alipour, M., & Saffarian, R. The effect of multisensory techniques on reading comprehension among pre-intermediate EFL learners: The case of gender. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, 1(2), (2012), 192-196. Retrieved on September 6, 2012 from <http://worldsciencepublisher.org/journals/index.php/AASS>
- [13] Hişmanoğlu, M. Teaching English through literature. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 1(1), (2005). 53-66.
- [14] Howatt, A. *A History of English language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1984).
- [15] Larsen-Freeman, D. *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University press, (2000).
- [16] Linse, C.T. *Practical English language teaching: Young learners*. Mc Graw Hill, (2005).
- [17] McRae, J., & Clark, U. Stylistics. In A. Davies & C. Elder (Eds.), *the handbook of applied linguistics* (p.328-346). USA, Blackwell Publishing, (2006).
- [18] O'Sullivan, R. Literature in the Language Classroom in MELTA. *The English Teacher*, 20, (1991).
- [19] Philips, S. *Young learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1993).
- [20] Pinter, A. *Children learning second languages*. U.K.: Palgrave Mac Millan, (2011).
- [21] Premawardhena, N.C. Integrating literature into foreign language teaching: A Sri-Lankan perspective. *Novitas- Royal*, 1(2), (2007), 92-97.
- [22] Purves, Alan C. "Testing Literature". In J. A. Langer (Ed.), *Literature Instruction: a focus on student response*. National council of Teachers of English, Illinois, (1992).
- [23] Rashid, R. Ab., Vethamani, M.E., Basree Abdul Rahman S. Approaches employed by teachers in teaching literature to less proficient students in form 1 and form 2. *English Language Teaching*, 3(4), (2010), 87-99.
- [24] Richards, J. C. & Schmidt, R. *Longman dictionary of teaching and applied linguistics* (4th ed.). Longman, (1985).
- [25] Shakouri Masouleh, N. Methods are not dead. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Culture*, 1(1), (2012), 7-11. Retrieved on September 6, 2012 from <http://worldsciencepublisher.org/journals/index.php/JCLC>
- [26] Sharma, V. Literary work and the mind: Approaching psychoanalytical theory. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, 1(2), (2012), 171-174. Retrieved on September 6, 2012

from

<http://worldsciencepublisher.org/journals/index.php/AASS>

[27] Stern, H.H. *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1983).

[28] Tasneen, W. Literary texts in the language classroom: A study of teachers' and students' views at international schools in Bangkok. *Asian EFL Journal*, 12(4), (2010), 173-187.

[29] Ur, P. *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1998).

Vitae

Mohammad Khatib is assistant professor of TEFL at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran. He holds a Ph.D. in TEFL (Allameh Tabataba'i University, 1999), an M.A. and a B.A. in English literature from Tehran University (1977 and 1972 respectively). He began

teaching at Allameh Tabataba'i University in 1981. He presently offers graduate and post-graduate courses in SLA theories, methodology, literature in EFL classes, and English literature. His main areas of interest include SLA theories, language learning strategies, culture and the integration of language and literature. He has published some articles on applied linguistics in Iranian and international journals. He has translated a book of short stories from famous writers of the world and published a guide book on Shakespeare's selected sonnet.

Mojdeh Mellati is currently a PhD candidate of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran. In 2008, she became a faculty member at Islamic Azad University Tehran Medical Branch. In 2011 she was appointed as the head of the General English Language Department at the same University.