

Literature comes to the aid of pedagogy: Teaching speaking through literature

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Abstract

Literature has been widely used in teaching second language, in fact, only a century ago the main aim of language teaching was reading the literature of the foreign language. However, today the primary goal of language teaching is communicative competence and literature is one of the resources of language teaching among other resources.

One of the fascinations of literature lies in the enjoyment that it offers. Literary texts provide us with much aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure in that the writers often seek to delineate their vision of human experience through a creative, emotive use of language. Literature has been shown to be an effective resource for all language skills, grammar, and vocabulary. It provides ample topics for discussion, composition, and reading. The present study explores the ways literature can be used for teaching speaking.

Different literary genres, such as poetry, short story, and drama could be applied for practicing and enhancing speaking. Different techniques and exercise types can be used for applying literature in teaching speaking. Scenarios, improvisation, role-play, simulation, split exchanges, speculation on context and other techniques have been widely used in second / foreign language. The present study discusses these literary works and techniques in detail and offer suggestions for applying literature in teaching speaking.

Keywords: literature, pedagogy, speaking ability, teaching speaking

Introduction

Literature once had a prominent role in language teaching. Only a century ago, reading the literature of the foreign language was the core aim of second language teaching and learning (Grammar Translation Method). However, there has been a long-stranding division between literature and language teaching and for a long time literature has been excluded from ESL programs whose central goal is linguistic proficiency (Levy, 1996; Spack, 1985). In recent years, nevertheless, many teachers have acknowledged the linguistic, cultural, intellectual, and academic advantages of studying literature.

First of all, as Povey (1967) suggests, we should reconsider our justification for teaching literature to non-native speakers. "Usually our presuppositions remain unquestioned because of the long tradition of such courses for native speakers. Even to pose the question of purpose may cause shocked responses" (ibid.).

Maley (1989) distinguishes between two primary purposes for "literature teaching".

1. The study of literature
2. The use of literature as a resource for language learning.

He states that much of the confusion and controversy "arises from the failure to keep these two purposes separate in our minds" (ibid.). Bussnet and Grundy (1993, as cited in Levy, 1994) calls the first purpose, the study of literature, approaching literary text with "a spirit of humility (the how-

will-I-ever-understand-what-such-a-great-writer-has-written approach)” and suggest having students explore the text “in a spirit of discovery”.

Maley (ibid.) mentions many advantages for literature as a resource for language learning.

They are: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, and ambiguity. That is, themes, genres, conventions in literature are common across cultures; the inputs in literature are genuine and authentic; ideas, sensations, and events in literature are relevant to the learners’ own lives; literature includes all varieties of languages and subject matters; themes and topics in literature are intrinsically interesting; literature has a concise language, maximum output can be derived from minimum input; since literary texts are ambiguous and readers have different interpretations it can create the required tension for the exchange of ideas and discussions.

However, there are some counterarguments regarding literature as a resource for language learning. Makay (1982) mentions some of those arguments against the use of literature and properly answers those arguments and provides a sound justification for the use of literature in EFL/ESL.

Most common ones are the following. First, since one of our main goals as ESL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. Second, the study of literature will contribute nothing to helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. Finally, literature often reflects a particular cultural perspective; thus, on a conceptual level, it may be quite difficult for students. These arguments certainly need to be addressed if we are to reach a decision as to whether or not to use literature.

In summary, literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use level. Secondly, to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. Finally, an examination of a foreign culture through literature may increase their understanding of that culture and perhaps spur their own creation of imaginative works.

Literature provides ample interesting topics for reading, composing and discussion. As a matter of fact, literature caters for all language skills and components. Spack (1985) explores the application of literature as reading content of the students and the subject matter of their composition and asserts that students can gain much from literature and enhance their reading and writing ability.

The present study tries to investigate the advantages and the techniques of using literature for teaching speaking. It examines the possibility of using poetry and short story but specially focuses on the application of drama techniques in teaching foreign language.

Poetry

For children learning a second language, singing songs in the second language is one of the main resources. Listening to favorite nursery rhymes and songs works even for first language acquisition. The use of repetitive language, repetitive sentence patterns, rhythmic refrains, prosodic elements, and redundancy, could also help child language learners lower their anxiety and increase their greater ego permeability (Allen, 1989, 1994; Richard-Amato, 1988 as cited in Wu, 2008). These elements are abundant in songs and folktales for children. Also many "chunks" of useful language can be incorporated into children’s linguistic repertoire and can subsequently improve their second language proficiency. Various teaching techniques could be used to present and practice songs and folktales for children as presenting the picture book, using flash cards, showing

sentence stripes, playing puppets for story drama, playing the chosen story CD, reading aloud, role play, choral speaking/chanting, and singing songs with action.

Adults, too, can gain benefit from poetry. They can learn many good poetry lines as quotations which are both interesting and add to their communicative ability since a quotation can convey a great deal despite being concise. The following quotations are from poems by great writers.

Water, water, everywhere
Nor any drop to drink
Coleridge

A dog starved at his master's gate
Predicts the ruin of the State
W. B. Yeats

Most importantly poetry can provide a great deal of discussion during which learners can communicate their feelings, emotions, ideas, and thoughts. Since different people have different interpretations about a poem or even a single poetry line, it can create a lot of discussion on the topic which contains a great deal of improvisation.

Moreover; Gasparro et al. (1994) investigates the possibility of creating drama with poetry. According to authors some poems are mini-dramas, often written in dialogue form, and are suitable for dramatization because they are short and usually have one simple, but strong emotional theme. They assert that the technique of dramatizing poetry employs a multi-sensory approach to language acquisition by involving second language learners physically, emotionally, and cognitively in the language learning process. The use of poetry as drama in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom enables the students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language. The process of dramatizing a poem creates a lot of productive discussion among students.

Short Story

Telling stories is a very common everyday language use. Most of the time, we need to tell stories to amuse people or communicate a certain idea or concept. Short stories, which are a literary genre, are very common in ordinary life; we read or listen to short stories and enjoy them a lot.

For English majors there are two courses for Oral Reproduction of Stories. Students are supposed to read short stories by great writers and retell them at the classroom. Some stories are so interesting that students enjoy reading them or listening to other students telling them. Telling stories are also one of the common activities in language schools for enhancing the learners' communicative competence in general and their speaking ability in particular.

Story grammar is a recent area of research which is related to the text structure. Narrative texts tell a story and are the type usually found in literature selections.

Amer (2003) describes story grammar in the following way.

A story grammar represents the basic structure of a narrative text. It is the system of rules used for describing the consistent features found in narrative texts (Mandler, 1984). These rules describe the story parts, arrangement of the parts, and how the parts are related, i.e. the internal structure of the story. Story grammars assume that stories have several unique parts that are conceptually separable, though rarely explicitly partitioned. These parts are usually identified inferentially by the reader. There is evidence that such a grammar provides the basis for retrieval of information from story.

Learners need to be taught the structure of narrative texts to better comprehend stories. Moreover, they need to learn how to organize the stories they are going to tell. Many students do not know how to sequence their story parts; and therefore, need to learn and practice sequencing story parts and telling their stories fluently.

Language learners, like ordinary people, need also to tell jokes and memories. They have structures similar to those of short stories. Telling stories and achieving the ability to tell stories fluently and accurately can have great effect on their ability to retell jokes and memories. Furthermore, language learners can read short stories and try to create drama out of the story they have read, or even to perform their created plays in the class.

Drama

Drama is highly recommended for improving language learners' communicative ability. Many language teachers and researchers state that, only through active interaction between the teacher and students or among students in the second language within meaningful context, can language learners acquire communicative competence and the ability to use language communicatively and spontaneously for the required purposes (Canale and Swain, 1980; Rivers, 1987; Savignon, 1983; Wells, 1981 as cited in Young-Joo, 1995). Drama-oriented activities particularly need the involvement of learners in the active and dynamic process of communication; therefore, are specifically suitable for enhancing language learners' communicative ability. They give students a virtual experience in functioning in extended, realistic discourse in the second or foreign language; learners not only learn the appropriate language uses but also learn the communicative processes as well. The learners acquire the second language by using it rather than by studying it.

Drama-oriented activities are compatible with whole language philosophy which maintains that the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) should be used as a whole in real social situations and should not be learned as separated entities.

Using drama in classroom also pertains to group works which are sources of creativity that foster new ideas and provide solutions to problems. Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Young-Joo 1995) suggests that individual learners develop thinking processes through dialogues with other individuals.

Drama is essentially social and involves contact with others and communication of meanings. Paulston (1974, as cited in Young-Joo 1995) has stated that the social rules of language are more important than a mere linguistic interaction in the second language. She also adds that many communicative activities in language classrooms are devoid of social meanings.

There are many studies which have investigated the effects of using drama and drama-oriented activities on the speaking ability of language learners. Even in the context of first language programs drama is highly valued and extensively used. Drama education gives the students an opportunity to develop poise, confidence and clear speaking habits.

Young-Joo (1995) investigated the improvement of college students' communicative ability through drama-oriented activities in an EFL classroom and explored the students' reactions toward drama-oriented activities. The results of oral proficiency test indicated that the subjects made a significant progress in their communicative ability during the period of the research and the participants showed positive responses toward drama activities. However, there were some negative responses too. Cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, and linguistic benefits from drama activities were approved of by most of the subjects.

Whitaker (1998) experimented with visual/physical drama approach to language learning and came up with good learning outcomes: creative performances, consistent use of English (including

an issue of students not using English and how it was resolved), efficient decision making, and a high degree of involvement.

Stinson's (2004) Drama and Oral Language research project indicated that "a program of process drama interventions produced enhanced results in participating students' oral communication scores. Furthermore students and teachers identified improvements in the motivation and self-confidence of participants, as well as indications of enhanced inter-group relationships and communication across ethnicities."

In a study, Miccoli (2003) explored the value of using drama in a university classroom where the students worked towards the presentation of a play at the end of the course. The author mentions many advantages for using drama in oral classes such as overcoming or at least reducing shyness. The author suggests that learning a language could not be divorced from culture learning. However, in a foreign language learning context this can be quite difficult, because culture includes aspects such as 'how native speakers hold their bodies, how far they stand apart, where they look when they talk, how men shake their hands with each other, how children talk to their parents, and so on'. In addition, culture includes issues such as how anxiety and excitement are expressed, or how culturally accepted intonation is used to deliver humor or anger. These aspects of language are very difficult to be understood by language learners, and learning to use them properly is even more difficult and cannot be practiced in foreign language classrooms. Also they are not commonly addressed in conversation classrooms.

Drama is a very suitable way to bring such issues into the language classroom (Via, 1976 as cited in Miccoli 2003). Drama can help the language learners in foreign language context to grasp such cultural facts and they learn to use them properly through practicing drama in the classroom. Moreover, drama brings motivation and fun into the classroom.

In Miccoli's study students "worked towards to the development of their oral skills; learned to deliver lines at the right time, with an adequate intonation and appropriate body language, capturing characters' feelings and motivations and much more.

Several techniques are used for practicing drama in the classroom such as, scenarios, improvisation, role-play, simulation, and so on. There can be many innovations on how to use drama in the classroom and how to create drama-oriented activities to be used in the classroom. Duff and Maley (1990), which is a recourse book for language teachers on how to teach literature in the classroom, mentions some activities among which are the ones which focus on the enhancement of spoken language and speaking ability.

Here we mention some classroom activities which involve literature and drama.

Split exchanges

The teacher selects some dialogue exchanges from short stories, novels, or plays and split each exchange into two parts: remarks and responses and put the remarks and responses on separate sheets. Then the teacher gives the sheet of remarks to the students and asks them to discuss the responses they would expect. After a sufficient amount of discussion, the teacher gives the second sheet to them and asks them to match the remarks and responses. This activity creates a lot of discussion and the students learn many good chunks of useful language.

Speculation

The teacher finds some short texts containing mostly dialogues and very little description.

Then he or she writes three explanations for each passage and presents the students with them along the texts and the students are supposed to discuss about the appropriate explanation and choose the correct one. Then the teacher reveals the original explanation. Students discuss and speculate on the appropriate context in this activity.

Author's comment

The teacher selects a dialogue from a short story, novel, or a play along with the author's comment on how a character utters his words, and then he omits the comments from the passage. All the comments are presented at the end of the passage and the students are supposed to fill in the blanks with the comments which indicate how the characters say their utterances. The students discuss about the appropriate comments and after they are shown the correct answers they learn about the ways of expressing attitudes through studying the dialogues. Other activities mentioned in Duff and Maley (1990) are: word portraits, quotations applied in a speech, creating situations from dialogues, screen adaptation, translating a dialogue, and so on.

Other techniques

Plays and dialogues are also useful for presenting and practicing features of stress and pause in conversations. Most language learners have problem regarding the stress of words in sentences and where to pause in an utterance. The teacher can find a dialogue along with its recordings and give the learners the script to study and decide where they should put the stresses and where they should pause. After the students have done the exercise, they listen to the recordings and learn the correct places of stress and pauses.

Another activity could be practicing fillers in the same way as stress and pause were practiced in the last paragraph. Fillers are the words and expressions which the native speakers used to buy the time and find the appropriate words and utterances when they are talking, such as well, I mean, Actually, You know, and so on. Fillers are a good way of avoiding communication breakdowns and unskillful pauses. Second language learners most of the time do not know how to delay the conversation in the difficult times of communication, that is, they do not know how to use fillers.

Another innovation could be turning prose of any kind such as short stories and novels into plays. Students can be asked to convert a novel or a short story into a play or film script as their term projects. During the conversion the students need to learn how to communicate different ideas, concepts and functions and the activity can help them to improve their communicative ability a lot, specially their speaking ability. Also they can be assigned to translate a play or movie in their first language to second language, or provide a subtitle for a movie in their first language.

Plays can also be a good source for teaching language functions. Students can read or watch plays and learn many language functions, such as requesting, offering, thanking, apologizing and so on. Drama also can teach students a great deal about the appropriateness of their utterances. Teachers can select some dialogue exchanges and separate remarks from responses, then add two wrong responses (the ones which are not appropriate from the point of view of formality/informality) to each response and students are supposed to select the appropriate responses, hence learning about the formality issues in the foreign language.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, it is suggested that literature could be used in many different and fascinating ways for teaching language and the above mentioned activities and exercises are only a few of them. You, as language teachers can use different literary works and various activities for teaching different subparts of linguistic and communicative competence and ability. You can invent many techniques and activities, if you do not believe, just give it a five-minute thought.

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