



## **Teaching language through Literature: An innovative approach**

**Nagendra Singh Gangola**

*Research scholar, M.B.G.P.G College, Haldwan, India*

### **Abstract**

*Literature can be regarded as a rich source of 'authentic material' because it conveys two features in its written text: one is 'language in use, 'i.e the employment of linguistics by those who have mastered it into a fashion intended for native speakers; the second is an aesthetic representation of the spoken language which is meant to recover or represent language within a certain cultural context.*

*Teaching language through literature help teachers first to acquaint themselves with language use to develop their own competence and understand language as a social phenomenon, and not as an exclusive branch of learning. And another thing is that it transforms the classrooms as the stage in which there is real practice of communicative language. It also helps teachers to consider language as entailing social acceptability in other words; they can look to classroom language as carrying resemblance with the outside language. And As a result, this would raise communication to the level of a social responsibility. It is important that the learners develop their linguistic competence by learning how to express meanings in English, but also that they develop their communicative competence, that will allow them to transmit messages, to use the language to interact, to communicate with other people, which is, in the end, the basic function of language. It is widely acknowledged that a literary text with richness and variety can be stimulating for language learners and can be used to elicit a wide range of responses from the learners.*

*This paper intends to show innovative pedagogical practices and several suggested activities which can be used in language classes to develop student's knowledge of English through literature.*

**Key words: Literature and language teaching, pedagogic practices, stylistic feature, vocabulary and pronunciation.**

**Introduction:** Language teaching is a process whose aim changes not only from country to country and culture to culture but from individual to individual. The problems faced in teaching foreign languages forced the teachers to find out and develop some new methods and techniques. The so called "Communicative Language Teaching", which is very popular nowadays, gives credit to the use of the "authentic language" as it is used in a real life context whenever possible. Structured drills, which are widely used in especially audio-lingual method, make the process monotonous and these boring activities direct the students to look for new tools and materials, other than the textbook, to make the learning entertaining and interesting. Realizing this fact, the publishers have been trying to encourage and to eliminate this boredom by presenting simplified literary passages since 1950s. So in this research, the use of literary passages in teaching a foreign language will be discussed in detail.

### **What is Literature?**

The most general definition can be seen in H.L.B. Moody's approach. According to Moody literature is like umbrella term giving information on every business (Moody, 1971; 1). Therefore literature, for being interested in every kinds of written and spoken business, can be termed as expressing a specific subject e.g. literature for construction, literature for medicine, literature for child raising, literature for construction, literature for medicine, texts may express the author's style. In this case stylistically written literary texts may not be real life, whereas language use in literary texts is created by the authors and therefore may not suit classroom activities. If we go on to define "Literature" from the Language Teaching point of view, we come across a very important definition. According to Alexander Baird, "Literature is the use of language effectively in suitable conditions"

(Baird, 1969; 203). To him literary texts can be used in language teaching, because the language used in literary text is suitable for the contexts of the events.

**The potential value of using literary texts in language teaching:** Literature provides authentic material. The learners are exposed to actual language samples from real life and literature acts as a beneficial complement to such materials. Brumfit and Carter (1986:15) assert the point that “a literary text is authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly”. Such a text securely grips the reader’s imagination and makes scopes for the examination of the language as well.

Literature helps students develop interpretative abilities. Lazar (1993: 19) says, “Literature is a particularly good source for developing students’ abilities to infer meaning and to make interpretations. This is because literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/learner is actively involved in ‘teasing out’ the unstated implications and assumptions of the text.”

Literature enables students to get familiar with universal issues and thereby motivates them into reading. Collie and Slater argue that literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material that deals with enduring human issues. “Though the world of literature is a created one, it depicts contextually vivid characters from varied social backgrounds. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors. This vivid imagined world can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society.” (Collie and 286 ASA University Review, Vol. 5 No. 2, July–December, 2011 Slater, 1987:4) Thereby it increases learner’s insight into target language society and bridges the cultural gap.

**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. 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.

**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) prepares 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

**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:** Students are required to read a short story beforehand. 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 beforehand.
- 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 memorize 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)

c) **Gap filling** – Students are required to read the story beforehand. 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.

e) **Guessing from the Title:** Using the title to kindle students' curiosity about the story is an effective warm-up activity. It makes them interested about the story and enhances their involvement. The title of the story can be introduced in the class and the learners are made to speculate what the story is

about and the various ideas that might come up in the book. This helps them to think more about the text.

For example, the students were told to look at the title *The Woman in Black* which they were going to read, and they were asked what the story might be about. They said, “The story is going to be about a woman in black dress that has magical power. The woman in black may be a witch.”

f) **Visual prompts:** Various pictures and visual prompts can trigger the imagination of the learners. An easy beginning is to show them the cover design of the book and ask them to say what they feel about it. Several other specific questions can be asked to bring out particular answers related to the society, people, class, country or other information. The different responses were recorded on the 290 ASA University Review, Vol. 5 No. 2, July–December, 2011 board and discussed one after another and gradually the original title in relation to the story is unleashed.

For example, the students were asked to guess about the story of *Heidi* from its cover design.

g) **Key Words:** The teacher can mention some words and phrases from the text and ask the students to think about them and tell their denotative meanings. The deeper connotative meaning of the words in relation to the text is uncovered and the students can be taught from it. This explains the use of words in different contexts. Gradually they can relate the words with the story itself.

For example, the phrases and words like ‘madding crowd’, ‘promises’, ‘proposal’, ‘whistle’, ‘ghosts’, ‘scary’, ‘stormy night’, ‘shepherd’ and ‘countryside’ were asked from the text *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

h) **Listing words:** Different ways of listing, for example, using separate colors for nouns or verbs, or circling the verbs and writing them, make the students concentrate more on the words. The teacher writes a word on the board and asks the students to give similar or opposite words. Listing words according to the grammatical class of words may also help the students.

i) **Using Total Physical Response:** The students can be taught using Total Physical Response, that is, to act with some verbs in the foreign language which is fun and effective in case of acquisition. Through Total Physical Response the students were taught verbs with ease.

j) **Story telling with objects:** Any simple object like a fork or a cup can trigger stories. Mixon and Temu (2006) provide an example story with the objects—a spoon, a girl, a banana, a car and a monkey. It says that a girl had a spoon and a banana in her hands. A fast car passed by her. She was scared. She dropped the spoon and the banana. When she came back she found a monkey eating the banana with a spoon. She laughed at the monkey. This impromptu simple story helps the students feel confident that they can make stories too. So, the students can be divided into groups of four or five and made to make stories with objects.

k) **Thematic discussions:** An easy warm-up activity is to give the students a general feeling for the ideas presented in the text. They first brainstorm and express their opinions about the themes. Students then interpret and discuss with each other about personal experience related to the themes of the story. In this way the background knowledge of the students is activated which helps them to analyze and understand.

l) **Reading the story aloud:** Reading the text aloud helps the students to work on their pronunciation. Some sections of the Story was read aloud by the teachers or students.

m) **Literary and non-literary texts:** It is important for the students to realize the various usage of language in different types of text. This was illustrated in the classroom by showing the differences in the use of language between the story they were reading and newspapers, magazines and brochures. This helped them to learn to appreciate the power and versatility of all types of language.

**Conclusion:** For many students literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use

and for introducing cultural assumptions. The successes, of course, in using literature greatly depend on the selection of texts which will not be difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level. The use of literary texts, from language teaching point of view, will be useful, because these texts show how language works in contexts. Beside they show how, language should be used in which conditions and situations

### Notes

- [1] S. MacKay, Literature in the ESL Classroom, TESOL Quarterly 16 (4) (1982) 529.
- [2] M.J. Adler, How to read Imaginative Literature, Oxford University Press, 1972.
- [3] G. Lazar, Using Literature at Lower Level, Oxford University Press, ELT Journal 48 ((1994) 115.
- [4] Tran Thi Nga, Incorporating Literature into English Classes in Vietnam, Teacher's Edition, 1 - March, 2003.
- [5] B. Tomlinson, Using Poetry with Mixed Ability Language Classes, Oxford University Press, ELT Journal 40 (1986) 33.
- [6] N. Zafeiriadou, On Literature in the EFL classroom, TESOL Greece Newsletter, Greece,, 2001.
- [7] Le Van Canh, Lecture Notes on Methodology in Language Teaching, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2004.
- [8] E.B. Ibsen, The Double Role of Fiction in Foreign Language Learning: Towards a Creative Methodology, English Teaching Forum, 1990.
- [9] A. Maley, Literature, 9th ed: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [10] P. Maricodi, Integrating ESOL Skills Through Literature, TESOL Journal, Winter (1991) 12.
- [11] B. Baurain, Learning and Enjoying Literature in English, Teacher's Edition 3 - September, 2000

### References:

- Alam, F., Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English: Using Postcolonial Literature in ELT. Dhaka: Writers.ink., (2007).
- Brumfit, C. J., Carter R. A. Literature and Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (eds.), (1986).
- Canagrajah, A. S., Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Pres., (1999).
- Collie, J. & Stephen, S., Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, (1987).
- Correia, R., "Encouraging Critical Reading in the EFL Classroom". English Teaching Forum Vol. 44, No. 1: 16-19, (2006).
- Hardy, T., Far from the Madding Crowd. retold by Escott, J. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2007.
- Hill, S., The Woman in Black. retold by Turner, M. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited, (1990).
- James, M. R., Room 13 and Other Ghost Stories. retold by Colbourn, S. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1989.
- Kellem, H., "The Formeaning of Response Approach: Poetry in the EFL Classroom". English Teaching Forum Vol. 47, No. 4: 12-17.
- Kramsch, C., Context and Culture in Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1993).
- Krashen, S. (1982) Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. New York: Prentice – Hall.
- Lazar, G., Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (1993).
- Lems, K., "An American Poetry Project for Low Intermediate ESL Adults". English Teaching Forum Vol. 39, (2001), No. 4: 12-17.
- Littlewood, W. T. "Literature in the school foreign-language course". In Brumfit, C. J. & Carter, R, (1986).

### Further reading:

- Bowen, T & J Marks, Inside Teaching, Macmillan 1994
- Carter, R & M Long, Teaching Literature, Longman 1991
- Lazar, Gillian, Literature and Language Teaching, Cambridge 1993
- Widdowson, H. Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature, Longman 1975
- Volume-I, Issue-III  
April 2015