

LITERATURE AS A TOOL IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Literature provides the students with abundant examples of the subtle and complex uses of grammar and vocabulary of English. English is used at its idiomatic best and is used most effectively in literature. The teaching of literature would definitely help the students improve their language skills. Good introduction to literature can compensate for the deficiencies of the linguistic approach in the area of grammar, vocabulary and syntax and can augment the students' competence in English. Literature is lovable and pleasurable. It has universal appeal and it appeals to the hearts of the learners. Because of this strong appealing quality, literature finds an everlasting place in the memory of the learner. So literature is definitely a useful medium for language teaching.

Literature has certain specific uses in the language class. For instance, the skill of guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar vocabulary item from the context can be easily developed with the help of literature. Any literary text, whether prose or poem or a play, provides the learners with rich context and adequate clues to guess the meaning of new words we encounter in a text. In a literary text words frequently occur in related groups. These groups of words which are semantically related not only contribute to a better understanding of the text but also facilitate register based teaching of vocabulary item. Register based teaching of vocabulary can also be done with literature. Literature can play a vital role in the acquisition of syntax. The four basic skills of language, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, can be promoted through a literary text.

Keywords: *literary text, vocabulary, context, syntax...*

Introduction

Literature provides the students with abundant examples of the subtle and complex uses of grammar and vocabulary of English. English is used at its idiomatic best and is used most effectively in literature. The teaching of literature would definitely help the students improve their language skills. Good introduction to literature can compensate for the deficiencies of the linguistic approach in the area of grammar, vocabulary and syntax and can augment the students' competence in English. Literature is lovable and pleasurable. It has universal appeal and it appeals to the hearts of the learners. Because of this strong appealing quality, literature finds an everlasting place in the memory of the learner. So literature is definitely a useful medium for language teaching.

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four basic skills of language, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, can be promoted through a literary text.

Literature in a language classroom provides enough space for the learners to comment, justify and mirror themselves. Such a class can enhance the critical thinking abilities of the learners and at the same time maintain a learner centre environment. Thus, it gives the teacher an opportunity to open a broad context of language use for the students. By using literary text the language class can turn out to be lively and motivating. Most word meanings are learned from context. This is true from the earliest stages of a child's language acquisition onward, but the type of context changes.

Skill in the use of context clues to meaning helps the secondary school student in attacking unknown words independently. The context in which a word or term is used offers various kinds of clues from which the approximate meaning can be guessed. Students may guess meaning from context clues and then check their accuracy with the dictionary.

Teaching Concept Related Vocabulary

To really *know* a word means to move it from our receptive vocabulary, where we recognize a word and can accurately identify its correct meaning in a multiple choice situation, into our productive vocabulary, where we come to use the word knowingly and flexibly in a variety of situations. Our students' productive vocabularies grow when we help them develop precision in their definition and usage. There is also another equally compelling reason for teaching vocabulary in your literature classroom. In addition to gaining fluency with new words, vocabulary instruction can help students learn how these words relate to difficult ideas and concepts in the stories they read.

For an example of the usefulness of making this connection, consider Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Minister's Black Veil." At the end of this story, Parson Hooper, the protagonist, chastises his congregation from his deathbed for begging him to remove the black veil he has worn for many years. Regrettably, the Parson's reasons for wearing this veil are often as obscure to high school students as they are to the other characters in the story. What is the Parson saying here? Readers who understand the author's choice of words (i.e., parable, visage, symbol, judgment, loathsome) are much more apt to grasp Hawthorne's point that people are quick to judge others negatively, especially those who behave in ways outside the bounds of common societal expectations.

Considering a piece of literature itself, be it a novel, short story, play or poem, there is a possibility of alternative interpretations and concepts. These concepts are linked to be difficult for the students without additional assistance, and such texts are ripe for an accompanying vocabulary lesson. As an example of establishing a central concept, let's imagine you are reading Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," with a high school class. This text is full of rich possibilities for discussion and response. Among these possibilities is an exploration of the relationship between good and evil. Adolescent readers may struggle in comprehending this relationship at an abstract level. How can good and evil exist

simultaneously in the same person? Can someone be completely evil or entirely good? A focused vocabulary lesson can help students move beyond a simplistic understanding of this concept.

A lot of words that relate to the central concept can also be generated. In the case of “A Good Man Is Hard to find,” the text contains a number of words that relate to good and evil: *misfit, disposition, polite, wrath, tragic, committed, balance*. The students might contribute other words such as *guilt, sinful, purity, innocence*. To this array the teacher could add *malice, morality, conscience, virtue, provocation, premeditated, mitigating, selfless, remorse, compensate*. This approach has two advantages over choosing a random list of difficult terms from a given story. First, related words are easier to remember than a random list. Second, the experience of grappling with related words will help students grasp the story concept.

Vocabulary before Reading

A concept-related vocabulary lesson can be conducted while reading in situations where a strong reader/text connection is easily forged between the students and the piece. At other times, especially when it is advisable to build up students’ prior knowledge in advance, you may choose to conduct a vocabulary lesson before reading. John Updike’s widely anthologized short story, “A & P,” is an example of a “before reading” vocabulary activity. “A&P” is intentionally provocative in its treatment of this concept, and time (the story was originally published in 1962) hasn’t rendered its gender issues obsolete. Vocabulary thermometers are useful for distinguishing shades of meaning among related words. This vocabulary lesson introduces new words to use as tools for analyzing characters’ attitudes about gender equality in “A&P.” Place the new vocabulary in a random list on the board initially and ask students to work together to determine each.

Vocabulary after Reading

The teacher may choose to teach a vocabulary lesson after reading a particular text. This approach can extend students’ vocabulary understanding by forging links to other pieces of literature. Kurt Vonnegut’s short story, “Harrison Bergeron,” is an example of an “after reading” concept-related vocabulary lesson. “Harrison Bergeron” is a dystopian satire about an absurd future, where all attempts to assert individuality are immediately punished in the name of “equality.” Its disturbing premise offers a rich opportunity for discussion about the tension between society’s laws and the rights of the individual. Word webs (also called semantic maps) are useful in situations where new words naturally group together into categories around a central concept. After reading “Harrison Bergeron,” introduce the central web concept (e.g., valuing individuality) and three category headings (e.g., things that promote equality, things that make people unique, and threats to diversity). The students are asked if they already know any words that might fit into the three categories. Put these familiar terms into the web. Then, while reviewing the story, identify other words that relate to the central concept.

The students must be guided to guess how these new terms might be categorized in the web. In this way, the new vocabulary words are discussed in the context of the story and connected with words the students already know. Once this word web is constructed, the students will need more practice with the new words to learn how to use them productively. To promote this practice, link the concept of valuing individuality in “Harrison Bergeron” with a related issue in another piece of literature. Sandra Cisneros’s short story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” is one appropriate example. This story concerns a young Mexican American woman named Cleofilas, who gradually learns to value herself enough to escape her abusive husband. Many of the same words introduced to the students while discussing “Harrison Bergeron” (i.e., *condescension*, *pejoratives*, *aspirations*) can be used to analyze Cleofilas’s predicament. Practicing the new vocabulary in this context can help students comprehend this new text and learn how to use the words more flexibly.

There is no need to develop a concept related vocabulary lesson for every piece of literature you read. In many instances, the texts that are assigned will not contain difficult or unfamiliar concepts. In these situations the teacher can use other, less elaborate, methods to help students deal with words they don’t know. The teacher can model the use of context clues (looking at the sentences around the unfamiliar word for clues to its meaning) and structural analysis (looking within the unfamiliar word for familiar word parts) as strategies for independent word learning. Modeling the appropriate use of reference materials will also be beneficial. It will also be helpful to explicitly share the meanings of technical words such as *episode*, *archetype*, and *denouement* that pertain to the literature curriculum.

Collie and Slater present a number of reasons for the use of literature and its benefits in language learning, it is valuable authentic material that provides a platform for cultural and language enrichment that allows pupils to get personally involved in their learning. Here follows a discussion of these reasons in association to *Blind Faith* as an appropriate source.

To begin with, literature is authentic material that has not been fashioned for the specific purpose of language studies. Textbooks often include a selection of materials which present the language bound in a particular discourse and pupils are ‘*thus exposed to a language that is genuine and undistorted*’. Words shaped by the form of the novel, however, can be a valuable compliment as literary texts exemplify the language in use. Novels contain a more varied linguistic use than informative texts, for example, narration, colloquialisms, irony and satire. The language comes alive. It is through reading literature that pupils gain the opportunity to acquaint themselves with various linguistic forms and conventions. Ben Elton is known for his comic talent and his books contain a great deal of satire and irony. Therefore, reading *Blind Faith* offers the reader better opportunity in understanding the creative use of English than a museum brochure for instance. English literature is written for native speakers and through the reading of such materials pupils can acquire familiarity with the various linguistic uses and thus a broader understanding of the language and culture.

Literary texts provide an insight into the culture of a country. Thus, knowledge of society can be acquired through reading novels, not least in the context in which the characters are

described. How they think, behave and interact can help you make sense of their person and social background. Although the world in *Blind Faith* is a fictional creation it still portrays a realistic flavour of characters whose beliefs and actions reflect the social behaviour and cultural identities of real people.

Using literature versus a communicative textbook changes the learning approach from learning *how to say* into learning *how to mean* (grammar vs. creative thinking). Conversation-based programs tend to focus on 'formulas' used in contextual situations so there is little allowance for independent thought and adaptation of language. On the other hand, literature-based programs focus on personal interpretation of the language so students begin to experiment with the language. This experimentation can be especially helpful to the students for use in different subjects such as science. However what is lacking in most of our English classes is the integration between language and literature. So, what we need is not the abolition of Literature teaching but the right choice of the texts and a change in the methodology adopted. Any literary work can be read and discussed on three levels, namely, the denotative, connotative and the evaluative. At the denotative level what is said, or what happens to whom, for what reasons, where and when in a literary text is discussed. At the connotative level, what is meant by what the characters say or do is pondered over. And at the evaluative level, how does the reader regard what is said or done is dealt with. Finally literature proves to be a useful tool in the language classroom.

Conclusion

Literature is a useful tool in enhancing the learners language learning abilities and also in developing their communicative competence. Literature is intellectually stimulating because a book 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 their vision of what the writer is saying. In this sense, the reader becomes a performer or an actor in a communicative event thereby enabling a natural communication in a second language.

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