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Literature as Media for Developing Language Competence and Building Social Awareness

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Literature is a kind of the artwork which uses a language as a medium. If it said that literature is a language in one side, learning literature is, at the same time, learning a language in the other side. English literature is literature written in English language. In this relation, learning English literature is, at the same time, learning English language. If literature talks about human life, by using literary works we can learn and build our social awareness, and at almost the same time we can contribute to nation character building. In this paper, the writer offers the mechanism of how the literary works can be used to develop language competence (in listening, speaking, reading and writing) and the advantages of learning the literary works in relation to the social awareness building or nation character building.

Key words: literature, language, language competence, social awareness, and character building

Introduction

In the English language learning and teaching, there are four language skills to be developed: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In this paper, why and how a language teacher should use literary texts in the language classroom, what sort of literature language teachers should use with language learners, literature and the teaching of language skills, and benefits of different genres of literature to language teaching will be taken into account. Thus, the place of literature as a tool rather than an end in teaching English as a second or foreign language will be unearthed.

The material of literature is something very general, such as 'human life'. This implies that literature can deal with every human activity, or human experience. Some of these activities are peculiar, some are more widespread, and some are universal. Therefore, we should expect that literature is "the record of human experience". As the record of human experience, literature may record may some aspects of human culture, especially, of morality.

Based on the Illustration above, literature can be used as medium to improve language skill and at the same it can be used to build human character. Learning literature is learning a language and at the same time the learners are made to be aware of morality.

The Use of Literature in Language Teaching

The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation)
is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays. Moreover, in translation courses, many language teachers make their students translate literary texts like drama, poetry and short stories into the other language. Since translation gives students the chance to practice the lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic knowledge they have acquired in other courses, translation both as an application area covering four basic skills and as the fifth skill is emphasized in language teaching. In the following section, why language teachers use literary texts in the foreign language classroom and main criteria for selecting suitable literary texts in foreign language classes are stressed so as to make the reader familiar with the underlying reasons and criteria for language teachers' using and selecting literary texts.

Literature is interesting and stimulating. It will allow 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 as they read. Using literature versus a communicative textbook (conversational English) changes the learning approach from learning how to say into learning how to mean (grammar vs. creative thinking). There are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement (Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies Vol.1, No.1, April 2005).

The non-English student who reads English well may have no difficulty in understanding denotations. However, he may find that sometimes the words bring to him different meanings or associations. Mastering a language is a matter of degree; and knowing the meanings of all the words may be not enough for a full response to literature. The first step in understanding a word is to know its denotative meaning. The next step is how to understand its connotation.

Literature, Reading and Writing

Reading skill can be developed from reading literary work. Reading literary work is more beneficial than reading non-literary work. This is because the former shows specific forms, dictation and collection of the given language; it also shows a kind of creative, imaginative and symbolic written work. Reading literary work is not meant to understand the denotative meaning, but at the same time it is meant to find out the connotative meaning. This is to say, reading the literary work is meant to understand what is explicitly and implicitly stated in the work.

English teachers should adopt a dynamic, student-centered approach toward comprehension of a literary work. In reading lesson, discussion begins at the literal level (denotative meaning) with direct questions of fact regarding setting, characters, and plot which can be answered by specific reference to the text. When students master literal understanding, they move to the inferential level (connotative meaning), where they must make speculations and interpretations concerning the characters, setting, and theme, and where they produce the author's point of view. After comprehending a literary selection at the literal and inferential levels, students are ready to do a collaborative work. That is to state that they share their evaluations of the work and their personal reactions to it - to its characters, its theme(s), and the author's point of view. This is also the suitable time for them to share their reactions to the work's natural cultural issues and themes. The third level, the personal / evaluative level stimulates students to think imaginatively about the work and provokes their problem-solving abilities. Discussion deriving from such questions can be the foundation for oral and written activities.
Literature can be a powerful and motivating source for writing in English, both as a model and as subject matter. Literature as a model occurs when student writing becomes closely similar to the original work or clearly imitates its content, theme, organization, and/or style. However, when student writing exhibits original thinking like interpretation or analysis, or when it emerges from, or is creatively stimulated by, the reading, literature serves as subject matter. Literature houses in immense variety of themes to write on in terms of guided, free, controlled and other types of writing.

Literature, Speaking, and Listening

Listening skill can be developed through literary works. The learners are exposed to recorded literary works or those that are read loudly. Using these, they can acquire how the language is spoken. In other words, they can acquire knowledge on pronunciation according to the sound systems of the target language.

The pronunciation problem is one of the problems in learning English. The problem is often faced by the learners because (1) since they were children, they were used to produce speech sounds in their own language, (2) their habits to produce speech sounds in their own language make them difficult to produce in the other language, and (3) there are different sound systems in the two languages (native and foreign languages).

Through listening activity, the learners can improve their pronunciation in foreign language (English) by imitating the foreign language texts. The texts may be taken from the literary work. This activity of learning may result in improving not only pronunciation but also intonation, stress, vocabulary mastery and sentence patterns, which are, in turn, useful for developing writing and speaking competences.

The study of literature in a language class, though being mainly associated with reading and writing, can play an equally meaningful role in teaching both speaking and listening. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-playing, reenactment, discussion, and group activities may center on a work of literature (Stern 1991:337).

Speaking skill can be developed through the activities of reading and listening to literary works such as poetry and fiction prose. A teacher may ask his student to read the texts and at the same time the other students listen to it. Then, each student is asked to make an oral report based on what has been read or listened to. But the most appropriate literary work is drama. Drama consists of dialogues. By using a role-play technique, drama may be used for developing speaking skill.

4. Advantages of learning the literary works in nation character building.

The term character building also refers to character education. The Character Education Partnership (CEP) has identified 11 broad principles as defining a comprehensive approach to character education. One of them is to promote core ethical values as the basis of good character.

Since teachers are already using literature with students, it is imperative that they make their instruction more meaningful by engaging their students and promoting important moral values. If children are exposed to character-rich literature in a manner that can serve those dual purposes, character education can be taught, encouraged, and promoted in our classrooms. Role-playing is another type of teaching tool that has shown to have positive effects when promoting values. Character education can be very affective, when used with role-playing and children's literature since both have such promising outcomes on affecting students' value development.
There are many strategies teachers can incorporate when utilizing literature that have important character building issues. One particular study indicates that teachers should preview the books used carefully. Having background knowledge of the issues involved in a piece of literature with a moral dilemma, helps teachers "guide" class discussions. Teachers should ask questions and provide details that will have students begin thinking about the circumstances or the story's dilemma.

After reading stories that have important values embedded in them, there are a wide variety of activities that teachers can utilize to help students comprehend and get personally involved in the story's dilemma. Role-playing, using open-ended questions, identifying with characters and their feelings, providing an emotional release, group discussions, story expansion, and written responses are just some of the different strategies teachers can use after reading literature to promote good character in children or students.

Promoting core ethical values as the basis of good character.

Morality always refers to something good or bad or positive or negative. People always have two choices: bad or good thing or behavior to do. If they want to be good persons, of course, the good ones must be adopted in their life. Literary works offer moral values that can be adopted by the readers in facing their life. In this relation, the writer uses Richard Wright's Native Son as an example of promoting moral or ethical values. The novel shows us white domination toward black people in United States.

In general the white's domination over black people as implied in Native Son can be deduced from the following quotations: "They got things and we ain't," "They do things and we can't" (Wright, 1966: 23), "They got everything," and "They own the world" (Wright, 1966: 25).

Understanding the negative impacts of white domination toward Black Americans, the students may—and they are expected to—behave on the basis of good moral values. They are, for instance, expected not to look down on someone (prejudice), to discriminate, to pressure, and to do the similar behavior.

Conclusion

Literature is a kind of the artworks that uses a language as its medium. Therefore, it can be used for developing language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Because, literature also talks about human life and offers moral values, learning and teaching literature may result two positive impacts: developing language skills and promoting moral values. If we do so, both learners and teachers are expected to be aware of character building.

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