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Reflections on Discussions of Literature: A Language Learning Environment to Promote Speaking Skills

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Abstract

Classroom discussions of literature create a pedagogically sound platform in the ELT classroom for language acquisition to take place. The pedagogic rationale for embracing literature discussions lies in the claim that they lend the necessary guidance language learners need to construct meaning, promote comprehension and seek ways to articulate their ideas, opinions and interpretations. This article discusses benefits of implementing literature discussions with undergraduate ELT students to empower their growth in oral communication. The data revealed favorable responses toward using literature discussions in language learning with regard to their benefits in building a solid foundation for learners to experiment with language by means of dialogic exchanges for the development of speaking skills.

Keywords: Language acquisition; Literature discussions; Meaning construction; Reading comprehension; Speaking skills.



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1. Introduction

In this study theoretical influences are directed by reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1960;1974;1977;1978;1985), which is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in the mutual relationship between the reader and the text. According to this theory, the meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context. The reader is the active participant in the reading process and the primary maker of meaning. By adopting aesthetic and efferent stances the reader maintains an active role in deriving meaning. In the aesthetic stance the reader is immersed in cognitive and affective elements to build his/her interpretation. In the efferent stance, the reader is absorbed in extracting information from the text. It is indubitably the role of the reader to make inferences in interpretation of literature and the meanings created are the reflections of both the reader and the text. Rosenblatt (1995), points out that reading literature is an exploration in which the reader is an experience builder and the text serves as a guide for interpretation. Classroom discussions of literature allow learners to perform more adequately in response to texts and construct meaning (Rosenblatt, 1974), and encourage them to articulate their interpretations which helps them with the development of speaking skills. Readers undertake several roles when responding to literary texts. The process of developing responses to variety forms of literature leads to meaningful reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) Active reading, emotional and intellectual participation in the text, creation of meaning, and elicitation of responses are major facets of literature discussions. It is important that learners devote themselves to developing responses to texts and are involved in dialogic communication to raise literal and inferential questions to construct meaning and verbalize their interpretations (Jewell and Pratt, 1999; Lehman and Scharer, 1996). It can be asserted that literature discussions have proved useful in creating meaning collaboratively by sharing knowledge and experiences (Rosenblatt, 1995). Through this collaboration, learners have the opportunity to elevate critical thinking about text, grow in understanding, make meaning from the reading and speak (Pittman and Honchell, 2014). The study investigates the role of rich discourse environment on developing speaking skills.

2. Literature Review

Discussion is defined as “a diverse body of teaching techniques that emphasize participation, dialogue, and two-way communication” (Ewens, 2000). Discussion constitutes the basis for enhancing critical understanding and establishing a feeling of community in which learners respect differing viewpoints (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999). Furthermore, a great deal of research has revealed favorable responses toward engaging learners in discussion with regard to its benefits in allowing learners to involve in their own learning, learning from others and improving cognitive skills (Dallimore *et al.*, 2004; Gilmore and Schall, 1996; Leeds *et al.*, 1998). Literature discussions are peer-led classroom activities which enable learners to articulate their ideas, opinions and interpretations. Learners who read the same piece of literature practice the language in meaningful interaction by means of discussions. The pedagogic rationale for embracing literature discussions lies in the claim that they are valuable classroom practices for language acquisition.

Literary texts offer learners a medium to consider a wide variety of interpretations which weave the skills they need to make progress. Conducting literature discussions has become the primary component of literacy curriculum. Literary texts offer learners an avenue for discussion which plays a major role in encouragement of substantive talk

and development of literary interpretive skills. With the rise of literature, classroom discussions have become an integral part of language classes; thus, learners have developed a critical stance towards literature discussions.

Additionally, through implementing literature discussions in the classroom learners have meaningful engagements with each other which lead to increased enjoyment in reading. Research shows that literature discussions made a positive impact on reading comprehension and interest in reading (Pittman and Honchell, 2014). Strommen and Mates (2004), state that “Readers learn, through social interaction with other readers, that reading is entertaining and stimulating” (p. 199). It is noteworthy that positive engagements with discussions of literature not only fosters positive reading experiences but also creates a stronger sense of community in the classroom. Put differently, literature discussions build a culture of collaboration and cooperation (Allington and Cunningham, 2007) and promote self-confidence.

For the purposes of promoting achievement, learners need to gather information from sources, then analyze, evaluate and synthesize it (Keene and Zimmerman, 2007). The creative use of the information helps learners extend their skills. Engaging in literature discussions offers learners an avenue to be involved in collaborative learning, construct meaning from texts, increase in interest in reading, build proficient reading skills, foster reading comprehension and create a sense of community in which learners negotiate different perspectives on text (Pittman and Honchell, 2014).

The instructional potential of discussions in the classroom switches the role of learners from knowledge-consumers to knowledge-constructors (Nystrand, 2006). Holding classroom discussions create a conversational setting for learners to construct and argue for their interpretations. While learners explore a topic collaboratively, they act as experts, develop their social skills (Christenbury, 2006), weld new knowledge into old (Beach and Marshall, 1991), learn from one another, and acknowledge ideas of others. Dialogically organized language instruction gives room to learner voices in which they put their energy into talk and knowledge-building. The creation of space for voices of learners stimulates dialogic talk and initiates learning. In classroom conversations, learners use their turns to answer the questions and the teacher uses his turn to direct activities, and flow of conversation. By means of dominating classroom discussions, teacher responds to the contributions of learners, weaves discussions and sustains conversations. The building of a dialogic classroom gives immediate information to the teacher about learning and comprehension of learners.

The selection of literature is crucial to the onset and maintenance of learner motivation. For engagement to occur, it is essential that learners are involved in discussions of literature. From this perspective, engagement in classroom discussions account for high attentiveness. Rather than the use of the question “why?” which sounds threatening, the use of “Tell me” and “How do you explain that” can sustain learner engagement and personal commitment to creating meaningful understandings (Chambers, 1996). It is also true that learners sustain displaying their engagement with discussions and build understandings of the literature if teachers do not offer their ideas until later in the discussion. Teachers, by doing so, create a space in which learners are stimulated for multiple interpretations. It is evident that when teachers avoid imposing their ideas on the learners during classroom discussions of literature, they help them construct meaningful interpretations. In essence, teachers can spark interest of learners with the help of a repertoire of questions and encourage them to become engrossed in classroom discussions.

It has been suggested that ability of learners to express their interpretations of literature can be greatly impacted by teacher’s classroom context construction, literature selection and the creation of classroom literacy environment (Hickman, 1981), and instructional approaches to response (Sloan, 2002). Nystrand *et al.* (1996) purported that learner interpretation can be strengthened by means of three instructional approaches to discussion which include asking authentic questions, practicing uptake and making high-level evaluations. They state that authentic questions are defined as questions which have multiple answers; thereby, a single right answer is not expected. Uptake is the restatement of a learner’s response by a teacher for the purpose of prompting further elaboration. Uptake disrupts the monologic teacher-dominated classroom discourse and creates an ethos of involvement in classroom discussions of literature (Christoph and Nystrand, 2001). High-level evaluations hinder learners from a commitment to a sole correct answer and inspire them to master literature in depth by creating a greater sense of efficacy in literature discussions.

In literature-based discussions, several roles teachers take are highlighted as: teachers as participants, facilitators and mediators (Short *et al.*, 1999). The roles of teachers as participants include talking about experiences related to the texts, unearthing ideas to spawn engagement, questioning confusing issues to encourage learners to contemplate other perspectives and making thematic statements (Short *et al.*, 1999). When teachers act as facilitators several roles they assume involving: providing clarification of details to avoid confusion, restating comments generated by learners to ensure that other learners do not miss something important, creating engagement and stimulating interpretive debates by questions (Short *et al.*, 1999). Lastly, teachers as mediators incite learners to relate the discussions to their lives, values and personal experiences, and invigorate learners to discuss personal issues (Short *et al.*, 1999).

Teachers need to explore new ways of engaging learners and aid them to uncover the richness in literary texts which contribute to the quality of discussions. Responding to learners effectively and inviting them to participate actively in literature discussions build an ethos for learners to verbalize their interpretations. Asking a series of comprehension questions seems to be a distinguishing feature of a teacher in literature-based discussions to lead learners to derive an interpretation of text. Discussions of literature are practice arenas in which teachers work alongside learners to negotiate meaning and emerge perspectives.

3. The Research Context

The research was conducted in an ELT undergraduate program. All third year students volunteered to participate in the study. These thirty-six students whose first language is not English met two hours a week for two months to read and discuss *The Pearl* (1992) and *Of Mice and Men* (1993) by John Steinbeck. While the former explores the destructive force of greed and corruptive effects of wealth, the latter centers on loneliness, friendship and dreams. Two research questions guided this study which addressed the participation of the students in classroom discourse and its effects on language learning:

- a) Would classroom discussions of literature be an effective way to promote speaking skills?
- b) Would literature discussions enhance student achievement?

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the role of whole-class discussion of literary texts in promoting student achievement. Specifically, the study was designed to reveal whether classroom discussions of literature afford language learners the opportunity to enhance reading comprehension, shape speaking skills and foster student achievement.

A major aspect of creating enthusiasm in students is to encourage them to select the reading materials for discussions. *The Pearl* is an appropriate choice for discussions. Its potential for increasing awareness of other people and cultures and interesting plot which revolves around fate, greed, hope and evil create context-rich conversational environments. Similarly, *Of Mice and Men* has universal themes that are common to all human cultures and therefore motivate the students to communicate. The students were expected to be thoroughly prepared before they came to classes; with regard to this, reading the book was the most important requirement for the discussions. In order to get the literature discussions going the researcher asked questions to the students. In order to promote participants' active participation in the classroom, he actively engaged in literature discussions through supporting them in creation of meaning, practice of language, elucidation of details and negotiation of ideas. The use of question-and-answer activities to spark and shape discussions promoted dialogic talk in the classroom. Seeking for answers to questions like "Tell me how it happened", "How do you explain this", "Did you say that...", "What made you think that way" invited the students to join the discussions and engage dialogic discussions. The researcher tried to ensure that a spirit of fun pervaded the classroom to provide growth in oral communication. During discussions metalinguistic explanations were avoided and conversational breakdowns of the students were repaired through recasts which included providing feedback on meaning. Additionally, for the students to attend to accuracy corrective feedback was used in literature discussions. All discussions were audio-taped and analyzed in terms of the quantity of utterances produced by the participants.

After classroom discussions of literature the participants' speaking performance was assessed by another lecturer who teaches oral communication skills. The students were required to speak about a given topic for a five to seven-minute speech. For assessing their speaking performance the instructor used the same rubrics which he employed for speaking assessment in the students' first and second year. Scoring rubric for speaking included accurate pronunciation, fluency, the use of a variety of vocabulary, expressions and grammar structures, and the ability to respond appropriately. A comparison of the first two years' speaking scores with the one the students had after discussions will reveal the effects of discussion-based learning on fostering language development. More specifically, this comparison will indicate whether classroom discussions of literature benefit oral skill development of language learners.

4. Results and Discussion

Over an extended period of 8 weeks, the participants read and discussed the materials. Not only they were encouraged to take responsibility for engaging verbally with others, but also were provided a wide array of opportunities to practice their language skills. Scarcella (1990), argues that active engagement in real communication leads to learners to show substantial growth in language development. Literature discussions involve a mixture of readings with exposure to comprehensible input accompanied by the use of English for real authentic purposes in a non-threatening environment.

Table-1. The number of utterances across eight weeks of classroom discussions

Weeks	Sentence Level	Discourse Level
1	35	18
2	43	24
3	52	35
4	61	46
5	70	57
6	82	64
7	94	71
8	112	83
n=36		

Table 1 demonstrates that from the first week onwards the number of utterances both in sentence and discourse levels increase considerably. That most of the students became deeply involved in the texts and engrossed in the discussions served as an invitation for them to critically respond to the texts and share their opinions. The findings support that a classroom context that enables the students to practice the target language meaningfully generates

extended discourse. Thus, it seems that the students had genuine purposes for language use through interaction with the text as they were concerned with expressing their responses, judging authors' styles, challenging each other's interpretations and defending their viewpoints. It is worth mentioning that literature discussions have the potential to engage the students in lively social interactions (Kim, 2004) in which they can raise questions, assert their views, elaborate on responses and refute others' ideas. The evidence in Table 1 suggests that the students took the opportunity to reap many benefits from discussions of literature by way of creating meaning and voicing their responses. It is possible to conclude that literature discussions can provide fertile ground for language learners to enrich their conversations. Reading texts and engaging in discussions of literature serves as a powerful vehicle to activate the enhancement of speaking skills.

Table-2. Comparison of speaking scores

Speaking score		Increased by
First year	63	67
Second year	67	6%
After the study	79	18%

A comparison of speaking scores of the students showed strong preference for the use of literature discussions in the development of speaking skills. The average of the students' speaking scores in their first year was 63 and it rose by 6 % in their second year and increased to 67. The average of the speaking score given to the students after the discussions was 79. The instructional potential of discussions led the students to demonstrate improvement and their average rose by 18 %. Literature discussions have the potential to allow learners to consider others' interpretations and share their understandings about the literary texts they are reading. The learners listen and respond to one another and endeavor to develop in their understanding. The exchange of ideas in dialogic classrooms underlies learning and democracy (Pradl, 1996). Literature discussions offer a pedagogically sound platform for literature achievement and language development because engaging in dialogic exchanges is "an instrument for reshaping experience, that is, as a means of learning" (Barnes, 1976). These community-building activities encourage communication and create a platform in which learners can elaborate their ideas.

Discussions help learners become aware of their problems and build a solid learning foundation for them to deal with these problems. Put differently, discussions bridge a gap between learners' current level of language proficiency and the proficiency they need to understand the input they are exposed to Van Den (2000). The participants in this study benefited from the discussions because engaging in meaningful discussions about the book they read lent them the necessary support to promote reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is "simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (Snow, 2002). Learners benefit from literary encounter because it helps them recognize different uses of language at different levels (Barrette *et al.*, 2010; Mart, 2018a;2018b; Paesani, 2011). Moreover, literature has communicative value and can create a conversational environment (Mart, 2018b; Scott and Huntington, 2002). That language learners are actively involved in dialogues with others provide them with the tools to bridge the gap between their interpretation of the text, their experience and prior knowledge (Nystrand, 2006). The mutual relationship between the reader and the text with the intention of meaning construction motivates learners to communicate their ideas. Literature discussions lend the necessary guidance for learners to experiment with language. Reading, listening and speaking the language within discussions allows language acquisition to take place. Striving for negotiation of meaning and elaborating ideas to others aids transformation of input into language acquisition. That the students in this study performed these tasks successfully enabled them to improve oral production and practice talking.

This study primarily focused on the development of communication skills when language learners were engaged in discussions of literature. The findings indicated that extended output was witnessed when the target language was practiced in a meaningful way by the students. The students had ample opportunity to assess language use by means of literature discussions; they evaluated and synthesized the information they collected from the book, and tried to construct meaning. Thus, their understandings evolved and sought ways to communicate. The study showed that literature discussions played a significant role in the language classroom to meet the need of the students for promoting their engagement with the texts and creating meaning, and articulating their interpretations.

5. Conclusion

This study explored whether creating classroom discussions of literature is a potentially worthwhile source of enhancing communicative competency. It was found that the use of literature discussions in the language classroom culminates in the development of verbal language skills. Classroom discussions of literature provide rich opportunities for language learners to respond to texts and construct meaning. While struggling for negotiation of meaning, language learners develop their reading comprehension and practice the language. The meaningful engagement of learners with each other stimulates them to verbalize their ideas which help not only communicative competence development but also language acquisition to take place.

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