

The Use of Literature in Language Teaching: An Effective Way to Improve Language Skills

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Abstract: Literature encompasses a wide range of genres, including fiction, poetry, and drama, and spans centuries of human experience and expression. Through literature, we can gain a deeper understanding of human nature, including its strengths, weaknesses, and complexities. The use of literature in language teaching has long been recognized as an effective way to improve language skills, deepen cultural understanding, and foster critical thinking. By reading literary texts, students can learn the language in a more natural and engaging way, internalize the language and develop their skills more quickly and effectively. This paper attempts to explore the effects of using literature in the language classroom.

Keywords: Language, Literature, Language Skills, Cultural Understanding, Critical Thinking

1. Introduction

Carter (1995) states that literature is “a body of written texts, produced by a culture and highly valued within that culture over a period of time” (p.102). Literature refers to written works that are considered to have artistic or intellectual value. It encompasses a wide range of genres, including fiction, poetry, and drama. Literature provides us with a window into the lives and thoughts of people from different times, cultures, and perspectives, and has the power to inspire, educate, and entertain us. Literature is a way of inviting readers “to draw conclusions from characters and events, to relate thematic truths to their own lives and values” (Morgan, 1993, p. 496). Literature can be used as a form of escape, allowing us to experience new worlds, emotions, and ideas. It can also challenge our beliefs and perspectives, helping us to grow and develop as individuals. Through literature, we can gain a deeper understanding of human nature, including its strengths, weaknesses, and complexities (Ghosn, 2002). This is especially evident in works of fiction, which often offer insights into human relationships, motivations, and conflicts. Poetry, offers a unique form of expression, using language and rhythm to convey emotions, ideas and experiences

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in a more concise and concentrated form. Drama, meanwhile, uses dialogue, character development, and action to tell stories and explore human experiences in a more visual and immediate way.

2. Literature Review

Henning (1993) supports the use of literature in language teaching as “students can develop a full range of linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge and sensitivity” (p.24). Literature plays an important role in our cultural heritage and personal growth. Whether we are reading for pleasure or seeking to deepen our understanding of the world and ourselves, literature has the power to enrich our lives and broaden our horizons. At the same time, literature can be a challenging aspect of language learning for many students (Mart, 2018a). This is due to several reasons, including the use of complex language, unfamiliar cultural references, and the need to understand implicit meanings.

One of the key difficulties of reading literature in a foreign language is the level of language complexity. Literary texts often use sophisticated vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and complex sentence structures, which can be difficult for language learners to understand. This can lead to frustration and a sense of being overwhelmed, making it difficult for students to engage with the material. Additionally, many literary works are written in a style that is unique to the author or the time period in which they were written, which can be challenging for language learners to comprehend and appreciate.

Another challenge for language learners is the cultural references found in many literary works. Literature often reflects the cultural, historical, and social context in which it was written, and many references may not be familiar to students who come from a different background. This can make it difficult for language learners to fully understand the meaning and significance of the text.

Furthermore, as literature is rich in language, it often requires a higher level of critical thinking and analysis than other forms of language learning material. Literary texts often have multiple layers of meaning and symbolism, and readers must be able to understand the implicit messages and themes in the text for a complete comprehension. This can be especially challenging for language learners who may not yet have a solid foundation in the target language or a deep understanding of the culture and context in which the work was written. In addition to these challenges, literature can also be time-consuming, requiring a significant investment of time and energy to fully understand and appreciate the text. This can be discouraging for language learners who may feel that they are not making progress quickly enough or that their efforts are not being rewarded. In other words, while literature can be a rewarding and enriching aspect of language learning, it can also present significant challenges for students (Mart, 2017).

However, with the right approach, language learners can overcome these difficulties and gain a deeper appreciation of literature in the target language. This may include seeking additional support, such as working with a tutor or teacher, or focusing on a particular genre or author that appeals to the student. Additionally, taking the time to reflect on and discuss the literary works with others can help to deepen understanding and appreciation. Literature has the potential to enable learners about the characteristics of target language structures.

The use of literature in language teaching has long been recognized as an effective way to improve language skills, deepen cultural understanding, and foster critical thinking (Frantzen, 2001; Mart, 2018b; Shepin, 2019; Mart, 2019b). Literature provides a rich and engaging context for language learning, exposing students to authentic language and cultural references, and encouraging them to develop a love of reading and an appreciation of the creative arts. One of the key benefits of using literature in language teaching is the exposure to authentic language (Mart, 2019b). Literary texts are written in the language that native speakers use in their daily lives, providing students with a rich source of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. By reading literary texts, students can learn the language in a more natural and engaging way, allowing them to internalize the language and develop their skills more quickly and effectively. Additionally, literature provides students with an opportunity to learn about the culture, history, and customs of the target language community, helping to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the language and its people (Weist, 2004).

There are several approaches to integrating literature into language classes, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. One approach is to use literature as a supplement to other language learning materials, such as textbooks or workbooks. In this approach, students read short stories, poems, or other literary texts in conjunction with other materials, using the texts to reinforce language skills and deepen cultural understanding. This approach is relatively low-risk, as it does not require a significant investment of time or resources, and can provide students with an engaging and enjoyable way to learn the language.

Another approach is to use literature as the primary focus of language classes. In this approach, students spend the majority of their time reading and analyzing literary texts, with a focus on language acquisition, cultural understanding, and critical thinking. This approach requires a more substantial investment of time and resources, but can provide students with a rich and engaging language learning experience, allowing them to develop a deep appreciation of the language and its culture.

Regardless of the approach used in the classroom, there are several key skills and strategies that students can develop when literature is used in language learning. One of the most important skills is vocabulary acquisition, as students must expand their vocabulary in order to fully understand the text. Embracing literary texts is an advantage for developing vocabulary knowledge. It goes without saying that vocabulary knowledge holds an important place in language proficiency development. Language awareness can be defined as “the knowledge, perception and attitude of the nature and function of language” (Chan, 1999, p.40). Language awareness is important in language learning for developing an impetus to perceiving how language is learnt and used.

The use of literature in language learning is an ideal medium for critical thinking which involves analyzing the text, identifying themes and motifs, and making connections between the text and lives of students. Literary texts involve a great amount of “language, content, culture, form, structure, affective values, critical thinking, and engagement” (Weber-Feve, 2009, p. 456). Additionally, students can develop their creativity and empathy through the study of literature, as they reflect on their own experiences and perspectives and consider the experiences and perspectives of others. Additionally, by encouraging students to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives, literature can foster creativity, empathy, and self-reflection (Collie & Slater, 1987).

The incorporation of literature into foreign language teaching has been advocated by many researchers (Duff & Maley, 1990; Hadaway et al., 2002). Literary texts include a wide range of grammatical structures and vocabulary; hence, they help learners with their language proficiency development. Moreover, the use of literary texts in language learning allows learners to develop communication skills because they contain “formation and function of sentences, variety of possible structures, and different ways of connecting ideas” (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.5). The use of authentic materials in language learning provides a great deal of advantageous to learners. Language learners can notice the various aspects of the target language when literature is employed in the language classroom. Spack (1985) states that “it is in literature that the resources of the language are most fully and skillfully used” (p.705). For that reason, literature has potential to allow learners maximize their learning experience.

3. Conclusion

This paper tried to explore the importance of literature for language learners, including the benefits of reading literary texts, the different approaches to incorporating literature into language classes, and the skills and strategies that students can develop through this approach. Literature is an important tool for language learners, providing a rich and engaging context for learning that can help. The use of literature in language teaching is a highly effective way to improve language skills, deepen cultural understanding, and foster critical thinking. Literature provides students with a rich and engaging context for learning, exposing them to authentic language and cultural references and encouraging the development of key skills and strategies.

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