

Literature in Language Teaching: What, Why and How?

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Abstract- This paper addresses some of the major issues related to the teaching of literature as a specialist subject and as a language teaching resource. The discussion includes an overview of the term literature, the possible reasons for using literature in language teaching and what it means to go beyond the traditional term of literature in the context of language education. Finally, some of the approaches to the teaching of literature have been discussed.

Key words: Literature, Language Teaching, Literature with a small 'l', Process-based and Product-based approaches.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature was an integral part of second and foreign language teaching in the 'Classical Humanist' view of education, where an understanding of the high culture expressed in the sophisticated language of literature was considered more important than communicative competence. Maley in 1989 [8] claimed that literature became insignificant when:

- The structuralist approach tended to exclude literature except in the form of simplified readers, and the utilitarian bias of the communicative approach deflected attention away from anything, which did not seem to have a practical purpose.
- The structuralists focused on linguistic form rather than creative use of language through the reading of literary/imaginative texts. Although, the so called innovative approaches with a functional focus continue to question the role of literature in language courses, literature continues to have a role in language teaching in many former British colonies. However, literature has to be redefined or extended in order to make it accessible in terms of texts and teaching methods for language learners.

II. MODERN DEFINITIONS OF LITERATURE

Scholars such as [1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11] consider the traditional definition of literature (as a canon of texts in a chronological order) as being rigid, elitist and unrepresentative however, more recent

definitions include the writer, reader and the text. Louise Rosenblatt in 1938 [13] highlighted the exploratory nature of literature in the following comment:

- The reader may explore his own nature, become aware of potentialities, acquire clear perspective; develop aims and a sense of direction.

In its broadest sense, literature is not restricted to print materials alone, but includes cartoons, films, songs, characters and stories (to appeal to learners' imagination. Maley and Duff in 1989 [6] made the following observation:

- There is nothing sacred about a literary text. All such texts were at some time written down, rearranged, scratched out, torn up, revised, misprinted, and so on. Anyone doubting this should simply look at any well-known writer's notebook or manuscript.

According to McRae [11], the definition of literature should include texts like newspaper headlines, advertisements, jingles, songs and cartoons. Cook [3] and Mao Sihui [9] make a case for imaginative texts or representational materials in language teaching.

It is evident that a narrow definition of literature is likely to restrict the ways in which literary texts are selected, organized and studied in institutions. The traditional approach to the study of literature with a focus on plot, character and theme is being complemented with other approaches in the present day context. Based on the ideas discussed here, the major reasons for using literature in language education are given in the following section.

III. REASONS FOR USING LITERATURE

Teaching literature in ESL since the 1980s has changed in terms of texts, approaches and even the language level of learners. The argument that only advanced students can cope with literature has become untenable with the emergence of new materials.

Maley in 1989 [8] listed the merits of using literature as a resource in the language classroom:

- *Universality*: The themes of literature are common to all cultures, though they may be presented differently. Even genres, devices and conventions of literary works are common across cultures.
- *Personal response*: Literature deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which are likely to be a part of the reader's experience or encourage the reader to experience the world of the literary work and relate it to their own lives.
- *Variety*: The themes of literature include all kinds of subject matter in all conceivable varieties of the language.
- *Interest*: The themes of literature are intrinsically interesting, because they are drawn from human experience and presented in an engaging manner.
- *Economy and suggestive power*: One of the great strengths of literature is its suggestive power. Even simple literary texts turn readers' attention to the underlying implications of what is said.
- *Ambiguity*: Because it is highly suggestive and associative, literature speaks subtly to different meanings to different people. It is rare for two readers to react identically to a given text. In teaching this has two advantages. It means that, within limits, each learner's interpretation has validity; also, because each person's perception is different, an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed.

Parkinson and Thomas in 2000 [12] stated that the final reason for using literature is a question of choice or "convenience". The success of the literature syllabus is related to the learners' needs, objectives of the syllabus, and the teaching methods.

IV. APPROACHES TO LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Although several approaches to the study of literature has been identified and practiced, the discussion is restricted to process-based and product-based approaches proposed by Carter [2].

A process-based approach according to Carter in 1996 [2] is one that:

- Involves the teacher coming down from the pedestal or lectern and involves a classroom treatment of literature which

does not view literature as a sacrosanct object for reverential, product-centred study. A process-centred pedagogy for literature means that literary texts do not have a special status in the classroom.

The converse of this (where the teacher is on a lectern or a pedestal and where literature is viewed as a sacrosanct object) will be labeled product-based approach. According to Carter [2], a vast majority of literature teachers consider the text as a "body of knowledge" [2], which has to be explained with adequate background information for the learners to pass examinations. The objective of this approach seems to concentrate on "knowledge 'about' literature rather than knowledge 'of' literature" [2].

A process-based approach to literature in ESL/EFL is based on the premise that students generally lack the language ability to study literary texts. Instead, literary texts are seen as a resource for language teaching offering scope for learners' personal interpretation from a cross-cultural perspective.

According to Carter in 1996 [2], a process-based approach to literature has the following methodological implications for the ESL/EFL classroom:

- Activities include cloze, prediction, re-writing, expansion, reduction and role-playing. Literary texts are treated like other texts in the language classroom.
- A process-based approach to literature is a shift from teacher-centeredness to student-centredness which encourages learners' personal reaction to literary texts through a series of language-based activities.
- Classroom communication ceases to be one-way with group and pair work. Therefore, teacher-student, student-student- and student-teacher interaction is possible in this approach.

V. CONCLUSION

The discussion is concluded by stating that the practical aspects of using literature in the language classroom should be the primary concern rather than terminological considerations such as, literature as a study, 'literature with a small 'l' or the advantages and disadvantages of product-based and process-based approaches.

The success of one or more of the approaches depends on several factors such as the selection of literary texts, learners' sociocultural background, literary competence, selection of appropriate teaching methods and class size to list a few.

Finally, teachers need not be specialists in literature, but a genuine interest and conviction in teaching the language of literature will help. On the contrary, untrained language teachers who have a strong background in literature may not have the skills and strategies required for the language-through-literature classroom.

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