English through Embarking upon Literature in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Many teachers have not eagerly agreed that literature can be an effective part of foreign language programs because of the lack of empirical research that can prove the necessity of literature in language classes. This study attempted to discover whether literature can be a pedagogically powerful tool for increasing Iranian undergraduates' foreign language ability. Sixty three students were randomly selected and served as the EG and the CG and performed on a TOEFL serving as the pre-test. The t-test formula revealed the two groups were not statistically different. The EG analyzed some poems and short stories during the course. The participants were all post-tested on another TOEFL, which revealed the EG came to differ from CG; results showed the study of literature is a study of language in use. Therefore, it can be hopefully envisaged as a means of improving EFL ability.

Keywords: teaching; culture; literature; language ability; authentic.

1. Introduction

The word literature calls to mind many difficult books covered in dust and piled in the corner of the library that is seldom frequented. However, according to Longman dictionary, literature refers to books, plays, poems and so on that people think are important and good. Literature is a journey of discovery and experiences that are directly related to the real world situations. Literature is so powerful that it can change the thoughts, lessen the negative manner and enhance empathy, sympathy, forgiveness, patience and so on. According to (Ghosn, 2002), learners can commiserate with characters experiencing challenging conflicts in hazardous situations. In drama, for instance, there are conversations and expressions of feelings; learners, through dramatizations and role plays, can sympathize and empathize with the characters in the stories and then they can generalize the feelings and emotions to the real-world contexts.

Literature improves learners' cultural awareness since it is inseparable from culture (Kramsch 1992, p. 175), and according to Allen (1975:111), literature is a facet of a culture. It can enlarge learners' appreciation of cultures and beliefs that differ from their own. In most work on using literature for culture learning, the emphasis has been on a two-way comparison between the culture of the learner and the target culture (Carroli, Hillman & Maurer, 2000). In other words, literature encourages *cultural and intercultural awareness* (Van, 2009). Reading literature enhances ESL students' knowledge of culture and society (Edmondson, 1995/6). Through exposing students to ideas from other cultures, literature teaches them about the histories and peoples of other times and places, and tells them what life is like in other parts of the world.

Reading 'Young adult books', for instance, inspires an effective knowledge of American culture in the students; it unlocks a door for EFL students to know American culture and society. For instance, Huckleberry Finn puts students into the mind of a boy who lived in the south in the 1800s, and allows them experience his life, which lets them know what it was like to live in that time, how the people spoke and reasoned and behaved. Therefore, literature can serve as 'the window of the world' as it offers the learners or readers the gist of one's culture, history, and traditions (Carter&Long,1991).

Literature is a good medium for increasing critical thinking among language learners (Gajdusek & van Dommelen, 1993, Ghosn, 2002, Van, 2009). After reading the novel, students can discuss and write comments on what happens in

the novel and compare it with their own lives and experiences in order to develop their language fluency and critical thinking abilities by understanding others' opinions about the text and expressing their own views. According to Langer (1997: 607), literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Literature can open horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore, which prepares them not to take things for granted. Literature can provide personal enjoyment to students, establishing an emotional and aesthetic connection between readers and the text, and helping to contribute to personal growth (McKay 1986); therefore, it can desirably motivate the learners. However, there are some potential problems: Problem 1: Where can the teacher obtain material? O'Sullivan (1991) remarked that, "It is all very well to point out the advantages of teaching literature but the key to success in using literature in the ESL classroom depends primarily on the works selected." If the collection is too easy, students will feel fed up and the teacher will have difficulty planning enough activities. If the selection is too difficult, students will feel discouraged. Young Adult Literature can be hopefully used in the ESL classroom. It is often written in simple, modern English (Monseau, 2000), covers a wide variety of topics that are relevant to EFL students' lives, and contains short enough chapters to accommodate EFL students' reading habits and ability levels. Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star is appropriate for young learners. The vocabulary is generally simple: The rhythmic element attracts students. Tomlinson (1999) asserts that the most learning occurs significantly if students are "involved intellectually, aesthetically, and emotionally" in the learning. Teachers should choose to use student-created materials, instead of pre-fabricated, one-size fits all published ones.

Goshen (1997) believes that cost is a main barrier, and the shipping expenses amplifies the cost of books that is already high. Nevertheless, a growing treasure of literature accessible from the internet can defeat the difficulty of expenditure and access. Teachers can use the free of charge internet sources below:

- 1. Magic Keys: http://www.magickeys.com/books
- 2. ByGosh: http://www.bygosh.com/index.html http://www.bygosh.com/cotw/index.html
- 3. Children's Digital Library: http://www.childrenslibrary.org/icdl/SearchWorld
- 4. Tumblebooks: (http://www.tumblebooks.com/)

Problem 2: How should the teacher select material? The teacher should consider the following issues when he decides to use literature: Does the teacher understand enough about the text to feel at ease using it? Is there sufficient time to work on the text in class? Is it something that could be related to the learners? Will it be encouraging the learners? Is the level of language in the text too difficult? Problem 3:Is the text too difficult? A teacher evidently would not want to use a text that is discouraging everyone engaged. Nevertheless, McKay (1986) presents some ways to get rid of linguistically and culturally complex problems:

- Use simplified texts
- Use easy texts, i.e. texts which are naturally more understandable and are suitable for the learners' level: modern literary texts by Hemingway and the like which are closer to the standard English (Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan 2011).
- Use 'young adult texts' because they are stylistically less complex. Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011) classified the procedures of teaching literature in EFL classes into three stages:
- I. Pre-task
 - 1. Schema Building
 - 2. Authentic Listening Exposure
- II. During-task
 - 1. Task Performance
- III. Post-task
 - 1. Repetition of the Task
 - 2. Reflection on the Task Achievement
 - 3. Follow-ups

2. Review of Literature

The study of literature gained prominence during the Romantic period when Wordsworth states that the "imaginative truths" conveyed by literature are greater than those realized by scientists, historians and other scholars. Wordsworth (1805) believes that poetry is the breath and superior spirit of all knowledge; it is the first and last of all knowledge - it is as eternal as the heart of man.

In the period of Grammar Translation Method, literature was originally the major basis of input for teaching in

language classes. However, literature, with the arrival of structuralism and audio-lingual method, was underestimated and therefore abandoned to the margin (Collie & Slater, 1987). Many of the approaches to language teaching, other than grammar translation, like the direct method and the audio-lingual approach used oral communication in the target language as a significant means for teaching. The communicative language teaching movement that became prevalent in the 1970s emerged in opposition to the grammar translation practice of teaching Latin. Therefore, literature was neglected in the period of CLT, which paid attention to dialogues which were more evident in the real world situation. This approach toward literature, according to Maley (2001), was due to the lack of empirical research that can verify the need to use literature in language classes as a tool that can improve students' language learning ability. However, recent approaches have attempted to reconsider the worth of literature teaching from several aspects, mainly, literature as an instrument for developing language, and enriching cultural awareness.

Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) stated that "the current consensus of opinion regarding the integration of literature in language programs is overwhelming, and by far exceeds the points of controversy. This consensus holds great promises as it is informed by current research in language teaching, language learning and acquisition, and psychology" (p. 35). After a long period of being forgotten, literature was brought back by many scholars. According to Duff and Maley (1991), in the middle of the 1980s, some language researchers revived literature that was ignored after a long period of time as language learning material. Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011) believe that this can be proved by seeing so many publications that bear the news of the return of literature in language classes (Maley, 1989b; Collie & Slater, 1987; Duff & Maley, 1991; Gower & Pearson, 1986; Hill, 1986; Lazar, 1993; Maley & Duff, 1989; McRae, 1991). Applied linguistics also encouraged the coming back of literature for language teaching (Belcher &Hirvela,2000).

The power of this teaching tool should not be underestimated. Zyngier (2006) states that teachers aim at the acquisition of language through the medium of literature. In other words, literature is considered as part of the language experience, including all levels: phonology, grammar, lexis, and investigating the text as discourse and culture. Moreover, Duff and Maley (1990) aim at exploring the use of literary texts as a language teaching resource. Tribble and Jones (1990) also showed how teaching literature can be rewarding for teaching and learning. Simpson (1997) claims that literature can be used as a point of entry into the study of English language. Teachers should take an approach that powerfully integrates language and literature. Carter (1986) asserts that work with models on the literariness of texts can aid such development. Using literature for EFL teaching has been beneficial for students. Langer (1997: 607) states, "because it taps what students know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy". Literature permits students to think about their lives, learning, and language.

According to Fitzgerald (1993), literature can be the means to develop students' language skills. It can largely familiarize students with various styles and genres. In literature "the resources of the language are most fully and skillfully used" (Sage, 1987, p. 6). In other words, language and literature are inseparable. Teaching literature can be considered as an important component of English language teaching. There has been a great deal of discussion on the value of trying to teach literature as part of an English language syllabus (O'Sullivan:1991). Reading literature is beneficial to language development (Johnson & Louis, 1987; Morgan, 1998; Myonghee, 2004; Sage, 1987). According to Abulhaija (1987), teaching language in isolation from literature will not move students toward mastery of the four language skills.

Literature can *develop reading, writing, speaking* and *listening skills* (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000, Crain, 1993, Erkaya, 2005, Fitzgerald, 1993, Knight, 1993, Latosi--Sawin, 1993, Nasr, 2001, Spack, 1985, Stern, 2001, Vandrick, 1996). Literature indeed helps students to expand their "linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge and sensitivity (Shanahan, 1997, p. 165)". Povey (1972:187) argues that "literature will increase all language skills." Novels are good for *extensive reading* purposes; poetry is good for *intensive reading* purposes. Students can be asked to dig deeply in the text for the hidden meaning that is embedded in texts and is expressed through such literary elements as simile, metaphor, allegory, and so on. Learners can be developing their *writing* skill when they complete a poem or short story in cloze form, or when they write the end of a story in their own words or narrate a story from the point of view of another character in a short story, novella, or novel. Stern (2001) also believes that literature can be a rich source for *writing* in ESL/EFL contexts. Moreover, when they are exposed to the audio versions of the poems, short stories, or novels, the learners can develop their *listening* skill. Additionally, the incidents in a poem, novel, or short story can be related to the learners' own experience in real life. Such a practice paves the way for hot topics for discussion in language classes can smooth the progress of advancing *speaking* proficiency.

Arthur (1968) claims that literature makes happen the acquisition of *syntactic* and *vocabulary* knowledge faster. A good exercise for making the *vocabulary* larger is reading short stories and novels. Literary texts are rich resources of accurate *diction*, diverse *sentence* patterns, and passionate narratives (Ghosn, 2002). Maley (1982) believes that drama provides unique opportunity to learn new *vocabulary*. Literature can be an example of language in use. Widdowson

(1975) believes that the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation. Van (2009) states that literature is full of instances of real-life language in various situations. Drama, for instance, makes the students in the EFL classes attentive; the artificial world of the classroom can be transformed into a quasi-real language situation. William Shakespeare claimed:

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts, His acts being seven ages. As You Like It Act 2, scene 7, 139–143

Sam (1990) talks about the value of drama in education. Drama has the ability of making the learning experience fun for the students and even unforgettable because it is interactive and visual. It provides an excellent platform for exploring theoretical and practical aspects of the English language (Whiteson, 1996). Literature can *develop sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge* – two of the main components of the communicative competence models. Since literature is authentic, it is pragmatically and sociolinguistically informative. In plays and dramas, Sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge can be particularly found. Works of literature are usually not written for the specific purpose of teaching a language and are intended for native speakers (Collie and Slater 1987). Therefore, it is inherently authentic and provides authentic or unmodified input for language learning (Ghosn, 2002; Shrestha, 2008); *authenticity*, which does naturally exist in literary texts, is a criterion considered highly essential in the present literature in EFL/ESL. Therefore, the power of literature as a teaching tool should not be undervalued. This study attempted to discover whether literature can be an appropriate vehicle for increasing Iranian undergraduates' foreign language ability. In order to contribute to the clarity of this study, the research question and its hypothesis are as follows. Does using literature in class improve Iranian EFL students' foreign language ability? To deal with this question, a null hypothesis is made: There is no relationship between using literature in class and improving Iranian EFL students' foreign language ability.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Sixty three Iranian undergraduate EFL students, both males and females, studying for Bachelor of Arts, majoring in "English Language Translation", and doing their Reading Comprehension course (3) at Islamic Azad University of Iran, Lahijan Branch, were randomly selected, and they functioned as the Experimental group (31) and the Control group (32) of this study. Their ages varied from 19 to 25, with an average of 21.

3.2 Instruments

In order to realize whether the two groups were at the same level of language ability or not, or to capture the initial differences, the subjects in each of these two groups, EG and CG, performed on TOEFL, which included one hundred items. In other words, the maximum score possible to gain on TOEFL was 100. With the purpose of post-testing, and finding out whether using literature in class had improved language ability of participants, the participants in both EG and CG performed on TOEFL similar to the TOEFL run at the pre-test stage.

3.3 Procedures

The practice of collecting data for this study included some steps: At the beginning of the study, that is, before the instructional phase, the subjects in each of these two groups, EG and CG, performed on TOEFL, in order to discover whether the two groups were at the same level of language ability or not. The two means of the two groups were compared through utilizing the statistical technique of t-test formula. The CG experienced its natural academic procedure during the course. However, the EG studied literature that dealt with universal topics such as love, hate, death, life, etc which are frequent in all languages and cultures.

The teacher, at the outset, tried to put the students in right frame of mind before implementing the treatment: The students were asked about the reasons why they are studying literature. The teacher tried to test their likings and abilities

through asking them about what they wanted to read and then starting with the most wanted genre. In order to gain the participants' involvement, and to motivate them, the teacher kept away from compelling his likes and dislikes rather gave them the choice; even those who were unwilling in the beginning involved themselves actively in the arguments. In order to build background knowledge and help the students enjoy the schematic understanding, before reading the short stories and poems, the teacher asked students general questions which were related to the content.

Over the 15-week period, throughout the course, the students were engaged in completing a poem, a short story in cloze form, or writing the end of a story in their own words or narrating a story from the point of view of another character in a short story, which helped them develop their writing skill. Additionally, the students were expected to list some of the most used adjectives and describe how these expressive words may affect the "tone," or mood of the story. The teacher, in order not to underestimate the students' enthusiasm for listening to a story, had the students use the audio and video equipment, which provided them with correct stress and intonation patterns: The students watched the movie both before and after reading inspiring poems and short stories by Langston Hughes (Minstrel Man), Rabindranath Tagore (Gitanjali, A Wrong Man in Workers' Paradise), Emily Dickinson (I'm Nobody! Who are you?), Robert Lee Frost (The Road Not Taken), ÆSOP'S Fables, Andersen's Fairy Tales, Anna Sewell (Black Beauty) Nathaniel Hawthorne (Feathertop), and Leslie Brooke (The Story of the Three Little Pigs), which wisk the students to distant and unfamiliar places and times and broaden their mind and leave them mentally rich. The teacher tried to keep his opinion reserved while encouraging his students to express their own opinions.

In order to post-test, and to realize whether using literature in class had increased language ability of participants, the participants in both EG and CG functioned on TOEFL like the TOEFL administered at the pre-test stage. The participants were scored one point for each correct answer. After the post-test was administered, the results were put under statistical technique of t-test formula to provide an answer to the research question. Therefore, in order to answer the question of this study, that is, 'Does using literature in class improve Iranian EFL students' foreign language ability?', the two means of the two groups were compared.

4. Data Analysis

Several statistical techniques were performed to reveal whether the null hypothesis of the study is proved or rejected. The results of the statistical analyses will be presented here in order to shed light on their significance.

4.1 Analysis No. 1

Table 1. t-test for the comparison of the performance of the two groups at the pre-test stage

Group	N	Mean	Std t-observed	
EG	31	57.2	10.1	
				1.7
CG	32	54.7	10.7	
p<0.05		df=61		t-critical = 2.000

Table 1 shows that the mean score for the CG was 54.7 while it was 57.2 for the EG. However, this mean difference could not be adequate to claim the group difference. Therefore, an independent t-test was employed to calculate the two means of the two groups in order to capture the primary differences.

4.2 Analysis No. 2

In order to be post-tested, the participants in each of the two groups performed on a TOEFL similar to the TOEFL administered at the pre-test stage. In order to find the answer to the question of the study: 'Does using literature in class improve Iranian EFL students' foreign language ability?' the two means of the two groups were compared. In other words, through employing the independent t-test, it was disclosed whether the two groups scored differently on the final test of the second TOEFL or not. The result is given in table 2 below.

Table 2. t-test for the comparison of the performance of the two groups on the second TOEFL at the post-test stage

Group	N	Mean	Std	t-observed
EG	31	65	10.3	
				3.1
CG	32	56.2	11	
p<0.05	df=(51		t-critical = 2

4.3 Analysis No. 3

The statistical technique of matched t-test was applied twice: to compare the performance of the EG on the pre-test with that of the same group on the post-test, and then to compare the same two performances but this time those of the CG. The results are tabulated in table 3 below.

Table 3. Matched t-test for comparing the performance of each group on the TOEFL tests at the pre- and post-test stages

Group	Mean		Std	t-observed	
	Pre-	post-			
EG	57.2	65	1.2	5.4	
CG	54.7	56.2	1.5	1.2	
p<0.05	N=31	df=30	N=32	df = 31 t-critic	cal = 1.69

The mean score of the EG rose from 57.2 on the pre-test to 65 on the post-test, giving a gain score of 7.8 points of improvement, and the mean score of the CG from 54.7 on the pre-test to 56.2 on the post-test giving a gain score of 1.5 points of improvement.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of Analysis No. 1

On the basis of the results in table 1, it can securely be claimed that this study included two groups which were not statistically different in terms of their EFL ability at the beginning of the study, that is, prior to the instructional phase. Having 61 degrees of freedom, we need at least a value of 2 before we could safely reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance. In table 1, the observed t-value 1.7 is less than the critical t-value 2 with 61 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the difference between the two groups at the 0.05 level of probability proved not to be significant before the experiment.

5.2 Discussion of Analysis No. 2

As table 2 indicates, the difference in the foreign language ability between the two groups was statistically significant: The EG progressed much more than the CG from the pre-test phase to post-test period. In other words, the observed t-value 3.1 is more than the critical t-value 2 with 61 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance: (t-observed = 3.1 > t-critical = 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that using literature in class is a very useful means for the improvement of foreign language ability. Thus, the null hypothesis of the present study, that is, there is no relationship between using literature in class and improving foreign language ability was rejected.

5.3 Discussion of Analysis No.3

According to table 3, foreign language ability of both groups improved from pre-test stage to post-test stage. In other words, the mean score of the EG increased from 57.2 on the pre-test to 65 on the post-test, giving a gain score of 7.8

points of improvement, and the mean score of the CG rose from 54.7 on the pre-test to 56.2 on the post-test, giving a gain score of 1.5 points of improvement.

Although the foreign language ability of these two groups increased from pre-test stage to post-test stage, the improvement in the EG was much more statistically significant than that of CG. In other words, the experimental group which was identical to CG in terms of foreign language ability before receiving the treatment differed from it after the instruction. Thus, the clarification one can have here is that this dissimilarity is the effect of the instruction that the EG received. In other words, Iranian EFL students' (in EG) studying literary texts was a very effective means for developing foreign language ability. Therefore, once more the null hypothesis of this study, there is no relationship between using literature and improving EFL ability is rejected. The t-observed for EG = 5.4 > t-critical = 1.69 > t-observed for CG = 1.2.

6. Conclusion

Many a time, English language teaching fails to reach its desired target; the students, even after years of learning English, do not enjoy the self-assurance of using the language inside and outside the classroom. Their production is limited to grammatically isolated sentences. But real communication necessitates ideas, feelings, and appropriateness. Scarcely does a conventional class provide the students with an occasion to utilize language in this way and increase fluency in it. In other words, the main aim of the language teaching course, developing skills in communication, is sadly ignored. This paper discovered that literature can be integrated in the curricula to provide students with an opportunity to increase their language ability (Erkaya, 2005). Those teachers who take optimistic views about the practical value of using literature in their classes will really be interested in it when they find it filling the way to success with light beautifully. Therefore, the power of this teaching tool should not be miscalculated by instructors, students, policy makers, and others concerned with developing language ability.

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