

The Impact of Using Novels in the EFL Classroom: A Pragmatic Outlook

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the impact of using novels, in the EFL classroom, on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension, in specific, and on sustaining a motivation level high enough to enable them to learn English language grammatical, lexical and cultural rules, in general. Novels, including a variety of language components in addition to the social issues, are uniquely effective in making learning an entertaining and interesting process in parallel with textbooks. Therefore, teachers and educationalists should seek new methods and techniques to be implemented in the teaching of novel in the classroom.

Keywords: Novels, Culture, ELT, Text Analysis and Pragmatics.

Introduction

Teaching theories and trends in language acquisition have changed over the past 100 years Influenced by linguistic, psychological, pedagogical and political perspectives drawn from "a mixture of theory, observation, and experience" (Alsswey, Al-Samarraie, El-Qirem & Zaqout,2020).

Language and literature are interrelated disciplines. Using literary texts in teaching a foreign language could facilitate learning that language. Moody (1971) and Brooks (1964) among others go with this trend;they assure that literary texts like stories, novels, poetry are inevitably rooted in language. They have certain characteristics common with language. Because of these common features, it is beneficial to include novels as part of the English syllabus and curriculum. Novels are essential in improving the learners' pragmatic, social, and linguistic competencies. Krishna and Sandhya (2015: 50) state that "short stories make the task easier for language instructors to teach the four skills at all levels of language proficiency and for students to engage themselves in different activities such as group discussion, role-play, criticism and interpretation."

Novels are authentic texts that help students acquire the culture of the foreign language, so they are used as stimuli for students to integrate language with its culture to make learning a foreign language easier and more effective. Banu(2012) emphasizes that using literary texts in the EFL classroom helps in understanding the foreign language society and culture and they

are tools that the teacher uses and offers to his students to make them acquire and contribute the cultural knowledge. Novels, as authentic literary texts, also play an important role in facilitating and improving the reading skill, the vocabulary learning and the structural analysis. Saka (2014) goes side by side with this idea; he states that "it is an indisputable fact that teaching literature is an important part of foreign language teaching. As a reflection of culture of the society in which the language is spoken, literature should be included in all curricula. Literature is an authentic material, and by reading literary texts, students face language written for native speakers and try to understand the texts (P. 278)."

Novels and Culture

Language and the cultural aspects that are available in literary texts, like novels, are inseparable because they are complementary disciplines. Novels reflect the cultural aspects of the foreign language society, so the learner's attempt to analyze and understand novels is based on that culture. Novel analysis is a complex process and a cultural phenomenon because readers need to have the social and cultural competence and background knowledge that would help them understand what is beyond the novel. *Animal Farm* is a symbolic novel; its characters are animals that revolt against the owner of the farm (Mr. Jones). They rebel against their miserable living conditions. The most intelligent animals are the pigs who become first organizers of the rebellion. There is a struggle for power between the two chief pigs ending in victory for Napoleon and in exile for Snowball. The novel has become an all-time classic read as a novel of entertainment for children. It presents the characters in an attractive and interesting manner, which calls for readers' focusing on the events stated in the novel. For advanced students and readers and for critical reading, the novel should be analyzed within the framework of the cultural aspects and the background knowledge of the author "George Orwell", who had, himself, fought for the Republications in the Spanish Civil war.

George Orwell's experience in the Spanish Civil war made him doubt his political faith. When Russia came to an agreement with the Nazi Germany, by which Germany occupied the whole Europe, Orwell's hatred for communism urged him to write *Animal Farm* as a criticism of communism. Accordingly, it is very difficult to analyze *Animal Farm* deeply unless students have complete knowledge about Orwell's political background and about the cultural aspects it implies. Banu (2012: 68) remarks that "literature is not only a tool for developing the written and oral skills of students in the target language, but also a window opening into the culture of the target language, building up a cultural competence in students."

It is generally agreed that there are many benefits for the teaching of novel in the EFL classroom, one of which is acquiring the skill of analyzing a foreign language text. Munby (1978) stresses the role of cultural awareness in the interpretation of texts. Interpreting novels is carried out by going outside the events stated in them, and by focusing on the background knowledge, context and cultural aspects of the novel. In this way, the teacher not only teaches the ideas and events of the novel, but people's customs, norms and culture as well, which leads to building up students' linguistic and cultural competencies. Pardede (2011: 16) points out that "by reading literary works, learners learn to see a world through another's eyes, observe human values and a different kind of living, and discover others living in different societies. They will understand and become broadly aware of the social, political, historical, cultural events happening in a certain society."

In conclusion, learning EFL novels fosters learners' understanding of other cultures, which are different from their own. This helps in the interpretation of those people's literature

as well as in the learning development of these learners. Novels to be taught should be carefully selected and integrated into the curriculum so that they become a source of interest and motivation to the EFL learners, who may, consequently, share other peoples their emotions and thinking patterns while improving their own linguistic abilities.

Assumptions behind the Use of Novels in Language Teaching

Learners' knowledge of the EFL culture fosters understanding and analysis of these novels and other literary texts. Amirthanayagam (1977) remarks that novels, as part of literature, are the most cultural issue because they render culture into an immediacy, freshness, and authenticity and give power of meaning that is hardly found in other disciplines. Language ought not to be taught apart from culture because both exist in each other.

Reading a novel which reflects its culture also helps in learners' development in many different ways. It builds up their cultural, social, linguistic and pragmatic competencies. Moody (1971) goes in the same direction stating that literature helps in the development of the learners in different ways including the intellectual, sensitive, effective and social awareness. He adds that learning literature, like novels, could provide a decisive training for the intellect including accurate perception, precise interpretation of language, classification of ideas, correct judgment, etc. Therefore, including novels in the EFL curriculum motivates the learners to analyze these novels effectively, stimulates them to practice the foreign language skills and, hence, helps them develop their language proficiency.

To deepen understanding the cultural aspects of the foreign language, learners should compare their own culture with the new one by analyzing novels from both language backgrounds; the native and the foreign. This will help them to narrow the cultural gaps and minimize the differences. Chien (2007) stresses the importance of finding the areas of similarities and differences between different cultures. If the literary text is easily understood and analyzed, it must be offered to conform to the culture of the learners which is based on similarities and differences between the literary texts written by the speakers of different cultures and languages. Duff and Maley (2007) suggest three functions of using literary works in the EFL classroom: a linguistic function, a pragmatic function and a motivating function. The linguistic function refers to the learners' knowledge of vocabulary and structural and textual analysis. The pragmatic function entails touching on the intention of the writer or speaker to find out what the function of the text is; this facilitates analyzing the novel and its implied references. Finally, the motivating function implies that reading literary texts, like novels, motivate learners to find the similarities and differences between the different cultures, which also facilitates interpreting and analyzing them effectively.

Approaches to Teaching Novels

Text designers and teachers should include carefully-selected literary texts in EFL curriculum because teachers can teach cultural and other linguistic aspects via literary texts. Anogul (2001) assures that EFL curriculum must include literary texts because they have many educational advantages. Some of these advantages are:

- a- Broadening knowledge of the different EFL cultures and of how other people behave in their societies.
- b- Challenging the EFL learners and encouraging them to be creative, self-learners and knowledge seekers because understanding literary texts needs background knowledge.

- c- Motivating learners to go beyond the literal and direct meaning of the literary texts.

The teacher is an important figure in the learning process; he should be able to create appropriate situations and choose suitable and effective methods and techniques for teaching novels and literature of the foreign language. Good teachers and curriculum designers should carefully select literary works that are void of cultural clashes. Hill (1994) remarks that there are three main criteria for the selection of novels: student's abilities, the linguistic and cultural level of the text, and the inter-textuality of the text.

Five basic requirements should be taken into consideration when choosing the methods and techniques for teaching novels and when selecting the literary texts in the curriculum. They may be helpful in constructing the EFL curricula and in teaching foreign languages:

- a- Learner- centeredness.
- b- Critical thinking and problem solving.
- c- Focusing on the individual differences.
- d- Relating literary texts to their culture and to real life situations.
- e- Focusing on discourse-based approaches rather than sentence-based approaches as the former involves the latter.

To elaborate, the focus, in teaching novels, should be on learner because he is the centre of the learning process. The relationship between the teacher and students is a dependency relationship; the role of the teacher is to guide students but to gradually make himself less needed so that they could carry out all the learning activities by themselves with minimal guidance from the teacher. If the learners become free from reliance on their teacher and if they understand the cultural issues of the novels successfully, they will continue to be independent self-learners.

The teacher should also choose activities of varying degrees of difficulty so that all students are given the opportunity to participate each according to his competence level. If the teacher notices that only a small number of students are participating most of the time, he then knows that teaching is mostly not taking place successfully and effectively. He must vary his techniques to make students do their work according to their abilities and the individual differences among them.

It should be firmly rooted in the learners' minds that there is no international culture and that the respect of other cultures is a must. The role of the teacher is to relate the cultural aspects found in the novels to real life situations. This could be carried out by giving the roles to students to play. The teacher and curriculum designers must avoid using novels which carry offensive cultural issues because this may lead to the learners' hatred for the foreign language and its culture. And, as a result, it hinders the process of learning a foreign language. Lubovich (1983) suggests the following educational techniques for teaching the literary texts: Brainstorming, Critical thinking, Role-play, Reference and Memory questions, and Group Work. Ghasemi (2011: 271) remarks that "it should be noted that the primary purpose of the use of a literary text in the EFL curriculum is not just to expose students to literature, but to involve them in a direct experience."

Suggested Procedures and Strategies for Teaching Novels

Reading novels is not like reading any other text because reading novels provides learners with a unique exposure to linguistic, authentic, cultural and social competencies. Using novels in

the ELT classroom raises a problem of how to teach them and what procedures the teacher should use in order to make the learning process effective. Ghasemi (ibid) suggests the following stages to teach literary texts successfully and effectively: pre-reading activities; in-class oral reading; textual analysis; group-work and post-reading assignments. Violettia (2015) goes side by side with the above classification of techniques. He classifies the activities of teaching literary texts into: pre-reading activities; while-reading activities and post-reading activities.

To achieve the goals of teaching a novel in the ELT classroom for advanced students, the novel of "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway is chosen to be taught. Hemingway's style is simple in writing; he uses short sentences and commonly-used words. He creates images and pictures in the readers' minds by using small and striking details. The theme of "The old man and the sea" is the strength of the human spirit. It reflects a cultural issue that the old should always have a high spirit and determination. Man, regardless old or young, should struggle to achieve his supreme goals. The old fisherman, having fished for eighty-four days for nothing, does not stop trying because he has the determination to succeed. The boy who helps him is ordered to leave him, but this doesn't frustrate the old man. Hemingway wants to root a cultural social trait in the readers' minds when he emphasizes the importance of doing the job as well as possible regardless of the problems and difficulties one may face. Finally, the old man catches a big fish which tries to pull his boat away. The old man admires the determination of the fish to escape and defeat him. He decides to pull its carcass to the shore even though the sharks eat most of it. By the end of the novel, the readers assume that the old man is defeated by the sharks and he seems to give up hope. He recovers his pride and his respect of his job and goes back to the sea because he always dreams of lions and strong baseball players that are symbols of strength and spirit. The following activities are suggested to teach the novel "The Old Man and the Sea"

Objective: the aim of teaching the novel "The Old Man and the Sea" is to expose learners to some cultural aspects taken from the events of the novel.

Part One: Pre-Reading Activities:

The aim of this part is to encourage the learners to use their predictions and guesses to analyze the events of the novel before reading. The teacher may give the following activities:

- 1- The teacher asks his students to read the title of the novel "The Old Man and the Sea" and to predict some ideas they may find.
- 2- The teacher divides the class into groups of three or four students, the teacher asks the groups to discuss the ideas they predict.
- 3- Each group will have fifteen minutes to make a list of ideas relating to the title of the novel focusing on the cultural aspects they may predict in the novel.
- 4- The teacher generates a list of the ideas the groups find. He creates a master list on the board and asks the groups if there are any other ideas they can think of to add to the list.
- 5- The leader of each group should copy the list from the board to use it later in the second activity.
- 6- The teacher asks his students if they have any background information about the author of the novel "Ernest Hemingway". He elicits the ideas of the students.

Part Two: While-Reading Activities:

The aim of this part is to motivate the learners to read the novel to determine whether the ideas they listed in the pre-reading stage are there in the novel. The learners also build up their social and cultural competence based on the ideas of the novel.

- 1- Since the novel is a very long one, it would be best to get it read part by part, so the novel is divided into parts to be given to groups of three or four.
- 2- Working individually in groups, the learners read the part assigned to them silently. Each one lists the ideas he/she finds and prepares an outline to be presented in his group. The role of the leader of the group is to write a list of ideas generated from the students in his group.
- 3- The leaders of the groups present the ideas they find in the part given to them in the classroom. The teacher creates a master list of the main ideas generated from the groups. The list is written on the blackboard.
- 4- To engage learners in thoughtful considerations, students are asked to compare and contrast their earlier predictions with the real events stated in the teacher's master list.
- 5- Students are asked to re-read the part given to them, paying more attention to the cultural aspects in order to compare them with their own culture.
- 6- Based on what the learners have found, students are asked some inferential questions which guide them to compare and contrast the cultural aspects they have found in the novel with their own.

Example Questions:

- a- What is the most surprising thing in the novel?
- b- What are the major social difficulties the old man faces and how are they solved?
- c- What do you think the reason behind the old man's determination to succeed and catch the huge fish?
- d- What are the social and cultural aspects you like and dislike in the novel in comparison with those in your own culture?
- 7- The teacher encourages students to express their opinion and reaction to the novel.
- 8- The teacher reviews and summarizes the social and cultural aspects drawn from the novel by using the semantic map, using the cultural aspects as a cultural organizing concept.

Part Three: Post-Reading Activities:

The objective of this part is to emphasize acquiring deeper understanding of the novel and to relate its cultural events to real life situations. To achieve this objective, the teacher may raise such questions as:

- 1- What is your reaction towards the old man's determination to catch huge fish? If you were him, would you encounter such dangers and act as he did?
- 2- Is the determination of the old man in the novel common in your country?
- 3- In the novel, there is a strong relation between the old man and the boy. Do you believe that such relations and sacrifices are common in your society?

The teacher asks students to prepare an outline of a composition they should write. Once each student has finished the outline, he/she should present it to his classmates. Each learner should write a composition including the major cultural aspects and the major ideas stated in the novel and elaborating and commenting on them.

Conclusion

Teaching novels in the EFL classroom is essential in foreign language learning process. The novels included in the EFL curriculum should be selected according to the students' needs, age, culture, interest and academic level. Erkaya (2005: 10) states that "integrating short stories

into the curriculum will help EFL students to become well-rounded professionals and human beings since short stories teach more than the skills necessary for survival in the target language. Short stories teach literary, cultural and higher order thinking benefits." It can be emphasized that using novels in the EFL classroom has a decisive role in the EFL curriculum because novels provide students with some cultural assumptions.

The inclusion of novels and other literary texts is necessary in the EFL curriculum because they provide the necessary basis for building social and cultural competencies and other language skills and components. Valdes (1986) points out that there are different advantages of using literature in teaching English as a foreign language, one of which is transmitting the culture of the people to other non-native speakers. Literature is used to impart cultural information. Saricoban and Kucukoglu (2011) go in parallel with Valdes. They state that the use of literary texts is essential for teaching EFL. Inclusion of literary texts in the EFL classroom has several benefits, some of which are motivational, literary, cultural, and high-order thinking.

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