Literature in Language Classrooms : An Overview

Punchalee Wasanasomsithi

Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

Introduction

There is an on-going concern among researchers and educators in both the ESL and EFL programs regarding how to balance a focus on form or linguistic properties with a focus on meaning or communication in the target language. A focus on form and a focus on meaning are not a dichotomy. Instead, based on a review of existing research literature and teaching experience, what seems to work best is an integrated teaching approach in which the development of language learners' grammatical knowledge and communicative competence are equally supported.

On the one hand, explicit grammar instruction, which includes direct teacher explanations and manipulative exercises, is needed to some extent. According to Herron and Tomasello (1992), teachers cannot expect learners to always be able to discover and internalize the underlying concepts of certain grammatical construction by themselves and that the induced concepts will actually be correct. In addition, teachers' guidance is

needed to treat such language errors as language transfer or overgeneralization when learners need explicit explanation why certain constructions are not acceptable in the target language (Bardovi-Harlig, 1997). Guided instruction may also be needed especially among adolescent or adult learners who may have already become analytical when addressing the rules that govern their native languages. According to Shrum and Glisan (1995), these learners who may find the inductive approach of grammar teaching frustrating "intuitively yearn to speed up the learning process by consciously comparing and contrasting their own native rules to the rules that govern the new target language" (p. 92).

On the other hand, advocates of the communicative competence model reject the explicit teaching of grammatical and linguistic features of the target language. Based on the belief that in everyday language use, speakers of a language focus their attention primarily on the meaning of what is said or heard rather than on the linguistic form, the advocates of this model define the goal of language teaching

as "to extend the range of communication situations in which the learner can perform with focus on meaning, without being hindered by the attention he must pay to linguistic form" (Littlewood, 1981, p. 89). In a communication-oriented classroom, learners are provided with the opportunity to practice using the target language for different communicative functions with very little, if any, explanation of grammatical rules underlying certain constructions needed to perform those communicative acts.   In doing so, it is anticipated that understanding and mastering of those grammar rules will naturally occur as a result of such practice.

One could argue, too much reliance on either grammatical accuracy or communicative fluency does not bring about fully competent language learners/users.   Learners who are familiar with only fragmented language from mechanical drills and rote memorization will find it painfully difficult to combine all those separated rules to send messages across to other users of the language.   Learners who know how to convey intended meanings but fail to do so with grammatically acceptable constructions cannot be considered able language users either.   Given such a belief, there is the need for an instructional approach which is mutually supportive for the development of learners' linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency in a foreign language classroom. Such an integrated approach will better help language learners to become able users of the language--the ones who can use acceptable grammatical constructions to function fluently in different communication situations.

In addition, there is more to language instruction than accuracy and fluency. Simply put, language learning involves not only linguistic but also cognitive development. Critical and creative thinking, therefore, should also be included as an integral part of language instruction.   Moreover, program developers and teachers should take the factor of learners' motivation into account when designing language lessons.   Unless learners are motivated to become actively engaged in the process of language learning, teachers cannot expect fruitful outcomes as a result of their instruction.

Given the increasing significance of Communicative Language Teaching, coupled with the need for instructional and methodological alternatives to make language teaching and learning more effective, researchers and educators in the field of both first language learning and second/foreign language learning have recognized various benefits language learners can gain from the integration of literature into language instruction.   A renewed interest in literature has surfaced as a considerable number of researchers such as Brumfit (1985), Carter and Long (1987, 1990, 1991), Lazar (1990, 1991, 1993, 1996), Maley (1996), McRae (1991), Povey (1967), and Widdowson (1975, 1982, 1983), to name just a few, have explored the possibilities of utilizing literature in language instruction. These researchers' efforts have laid a solid foundation for literature-based language instruction comprising ideas based on principled linguistic and methodological rationales (Bassnett & Grundy, 1993). Such efforts are expected to secure a central role for

literature in second and foreign language curricula for years to come.

Rationales for the Use of Literature

Advocates of this position strongly defend the merits of literature as a valuable resource in language instruction and maintain that ESL/EFL teachers cannot ignore various benefits learners can gain from their literary encounter. Their arguments which contribute to a place for literature in language instruction are summarized as follows:

1.   **Literature increases learners' language skills**

Povey (1972) argues that literature helps extend language learners' linguistic knowledge because it provides examples of a wide range of vocabulary in contexts and syntactical structures. Moreover, language used in literature ranges from the formal to the colloquial and idiosyncratic. Spack (1985) claims that "it is in literature that the resources of the language are most fully and skillfully used. Students thus should have the opportunity to see how the language is used-- and then to use the language--with the greatest possible skills and effect" (p. 705). In addition, Bassnett and Grundy (1993) argue that by representing the most skillful use of the language, literature can most appropriately serve learners who seek knowledge of the target language that goes beyond the utilitarian level.

2.   **Literature is a rich source of meaningful input**

Pugh (1989) points out that literature can play a significant role in learners' language development beginning at the early stages. To her, literature is "a potentially rich source of meaningful input outside the classroom, especially in settings where the target language is not the language of the environment" (p. 320). She continues that reading literature, in this sense, is regarded not as a vehicle for grammar-translation but as a significant language experience in its own right. This view is in harmony with the SLA theory proposed by Krashen (1981, 1982, 1985) which maintains that language learners can develop greater language proficiency through instruction which provides sufficient amount of comprehensible input. In short, literature offers learners varied and worthwhile language input, which, in turn, enables them to become competent language users.

3.   **Literature enlarges learners' overall language awareness**

According to Lazar (1994), literature can also be used as a powerful tool to expand learners' overall language awareness. From their interaction with literature, learners will become aware that discourse can be sequenced and organized in different ways; that words are linked with each other in relationships of synonymity and opposition; and that the meaning of a text may not be explicit, but needs to be inferred instead. Put another way, from their literary encounter, language learners will realize that language can actually be used in different ways, at different levels, and for different functions and purposes.

4. Literature offers valuable authentic materials

Carter & Long (1991) contend that literature provides learners with an incomparably rich source of authentic materials over a wide range of registers. If learners can gain access to such materials by developing literary competence, then they should effectively internalize the language at a very high level (Elliot, 1990). Further, it is undeniable that an encounter with literature in language classes tremendously benefits learners' reading skills development. Insofar as literature can influence an overall increase in reading proficiency, it will, albeit indirectly, help learners achieve their goal of academic learning. The explanation for this is that possessing reading proficiency allows one to deal efficiently and effectively with any kind of reading materials, whether literary or not.

5. Literature enhances learners' communicative competence

With the increasing recognition of the significance of communicative competence, language learners can profit from the study of literature which helps them learn to identify and understand the operations of language for different communicative functions (Akyel & Yalcin, 1990). Moreover, literature motivates interaction among language learners which is necessary for the development of communicative competence. Due to the fact that literary texts are open to multiple interpretations, they provide a *ready-made* opinion gap between one individual's interpretation and others' which can be bridged by genuine interaction (Gilroy, 1995). While engaging in active discussion, learners will have an opportunity not only to learn to listen to and accept others' opinions, but to practice using the language in meaningful interaction for different communicative purposes.

6. Literature fosters learners' higher-order thinking skills

Jones (1985) is an advocate of the use of literature to develop learners' higher-order thinking skills. According to Jones, when reading a literary text, it is not enough for learners to merely decode words in order to determine their meanings. Rather, dealing with literature requires an interaction among learners, the information suggested in the text, and the characteristics of the context. The goal of reading a piece of literature, then, is to construct meaning from text. "The act of constructing meaning from text is fundamentally higher-order thinking at every stage of comprehending and responding to text" (p. 112).

7. Literature promotes learners' understanding of the target culture

Literature is not only a reflection of individual experiences but also a portrayal of the culture of the author. According to McKay (1986), an examination of a foreign culture through literature will increase learners' understanding of people who are different from themselves, and at the same time, develop what is called "a greater tolerance for cultural differences" (p. 193). As technological advancement brings different parts of the world together, an understanding of people who are different from oneself is essential to being a world citizen. In addition, Marquardt

(1968) emphasizes that the knowledge of the culture of a society in which the target language is spoken is as crucial as mastery of speech patterns. Therefore, the study of literature becomes "the surest way to attain these more elusive qualities that go to make up a total mastery of the language" (p. 9).

8. Literature improves learners' interpretive ability

A literary text is created from language, but it is learners, as readers, who confer meanings on the text. Moreover, as literary texts are often so rich in multiple levels of meaning, they elude one single interpretation. Literature, therefore, is a good source for classroom activities that encourage learners to practice their interpretive ability by drawing inferences and *teasing out* underlying assumptions of the text (Lazar, 1996). These interpretive abilities are crucial in the process of language learning, for instance, when learners are trying to understand what an interlocutor really means in a conversation or what a stanza of a poem conveys.

9. Literature enables learners to outgrow themselves

Literature offers genuine samples of a wide range of styles, registers, and text-types dealing with non-trivial matters to which learners can personally respond based on their own experiences (Duff & Maley, 1990). Further, literature often conveys universal themes which readers can recognize, not only in the selection itself, but in other contexts as well. As such, reading literature encourages learners to draw on their personal opinions and

experiences. By becoming personally invested in the process of language learning, not only will learners have a chance to gain greater insights about themselves and the world, but they will also begin to own the language they are learning more fully.

10. Literature expands learners' imaginative sensibilities

According to McRae (1991), absence of imaginative content in language teaching limits learners' creative involvement with the target language and leads to one-dimensional learning achievement. Literature encourages learners to bring into play and expand their imaginative sensibilities (Gwin, 1990). In addition, varied themes of human dilemma, conflict, and yearning give learners a chance to extend their emotional experience beyond their own lives which, in turn, enables them to develop emotional maturity.

11. Literature encourages learners' development of moral and ethical concerns

Since there will always be controversial issues involved in literature, literature can be used as a basis for moral and ethical discussion. Lazar (1993) suggests the use of literary texts to raise moral and ethical concerns in the language classroom, stating "the tasks and activities we devise to exploit these texts should encourage our students to explore these concerns and connect them with the struggle for a better society" (p. 3).

Supporting characteristics of literature

This paper defines literature as expressive or imaginative writings which can come in the form of poetry, plays or dramas,

short stories, and novels, among other genres. In order to be valuable for language lessons, these expressive and imaginative writings should possess some inherent qualities supportive of the language learning process. For instance, they should exemplify the different elements of the target language such as lexicon and syntax, in ways that are helpful to the learners' level of language development, that is, simpler writings for learners at early stages and more complex writings for those at advanced levels. Also, these literary writings should illustrate how language can be used for different communicative functions such as expressing feelings or communicating information. And most importantly, literature for language learning should engage learners in the reading process, not simply to obtain information, but to interact with the texts, interpretatively, critically, and imaginatively, so as to arrive at the highest possible level of understanding and appreciation. In short, literature provides learners with opportunity to use their cognitive and creative skills while developing their language abilities.

A common characteristic of literature that supports this interaction between readers and texts is its narrative nature. It is worth noting that among different genres of literature, excerpts from novels and short stories receive the highest degree of popularity among ESL teachers (Ling, 1997). One plausible explanation may be that stories, or narratives, are the most common form of expression in anyone's life. By narrating a story, people have a chance to express their life experiences as well as their inner states of mind or their thinking. It is this universal nature of narrative that makes it effective text for language learning. Narrative is basically a form of a continuing interpretation of one's life, or in Bruner's (1988) words, "a set of procedures for 'life making'" (p. 575). Though all genres of literature may originate from the act of narrating or telling a story, stories are the simplest form of narration. Readers are easily drawn to stories because telling a story is a common occurrence in their own lives. Stories are what they live by, what they live in, and what they see the world through (Randall, 1995). Narrative characteristics of stories can be found in other genres of literature such as poetry or plays. Therefore, it is not the genre so much as the accessibility of the genre that makes literature useful for language learning.

Another reason why literature is an effective medium supporting such an integrated approach to language instruction is that literature is a good motivation tool. Frequently, there are elements of suspense, intrigue, and fascination that captivate the readers' imagination enough to keep on reading. As such, it is suitable material especially for language learners who find fragmented textbooks too boring to sustain their interest in both the texts themselves and the language being learned.

To sum up, there is more to a good piece of literature than merely being imaginative or expressive. Rather, good literature offers itself as an ideal medium with which language learners can learn to unravel different levels of meaning and discover different aspects of language learning formerly unbeknownst to them.

How literature supports the development of grammatical knowledge

There is as yet no definite agreement as to how explicitly grammar should be taught in second and foreign language instruction. However, for teachers who want to provide learners with grammatical knowledge but at the same time want to avoid traditional grammar instruction which more often than not means artificial language practice, literature seems to provide a sought-after answer. As Krashen (1982, 1985) stresses, grammatical structures will be subconsciously acquired when learners are exposed to structures that are a little beyond their current level of competence (the "i+1" hypothesis) and automatically internalized when learners use the structures for communicative purposes. By using authentic literary materials, not only are teachers able to eliminate the fragmentation and artificiality of the language, but they can also foreshadow the grammar explanation through the use of integrated discourse that highlight the grammatical structures to be taught (Shrum & Glison, 1994). In doing so, learner have a chance to familiarize themselves with the targeted grammatical structures while their attention is focused on the meaningful and functional use of the language. Teachers can subsequently draw learners' attention to the targeted grammatical structures once learners have arrived at sufficient understanding of the literary materials they have encountered. Celcia-Murcia (1985) suggests that when discussing grammar instruction, "one of the best times for [language learners] to attend to form is after comprehension has been achieved and in conjunction with their production of meaningful discourse" (p. 301). With the use of appropriate literature, language learners will be enabled to master the grammatical constructions presented in selected literary pieces simultaneously with trying to meaningfully communicate about the content of the literary materials they have read.

How literature supports the development of communicative competence

Advocates of the communicative approach to language learning claim that language input learners receive from traditional grammar instruction is too fragmented and artificial to be meaningful and thus, is not retained for subsequent use. The authenticity of the language presented in literature can address this problem. Shrum and Glisan (1994) suggest the use of authentic materials including literature to develop language learners' communicative skills, especially reading and listening. Based on the claim that language acquisition can only occur when there is sufficient comprehension, Shrum and Glison recommend the use of authentic literary texts to develop learners' comprehension by citing a number of empirical studies such as Bacon (1989), Herron and Seay (1991), Vigil (1987), etc. which confirm positive results gained by language learners who are exposed to and interact with authentic texts. For these language learners, the exposure to authentic texts not only results in progress in comprehension, but also leads to improvements in oral and written performance in the target language.

In order to establish communicative lessons, Candlin (1996) suggests what is needed is a principle which promotes learners' communicative competence to make meanings from and within texts, guided by the curriculum and facilitated by the teacher. According to Candlin, one of the most important basis for a successful communicative classroom is creativity. His contention thus supports the use of literature because it can be utilized to develop learners' creative abilities which, in turn, can be realized in communicative action through engagement with literary texts. Besides, the use of literature poses the challenge of meaning-making tasks through which learners' boundaries of communicative ability can be expanded. Put another way, literature is a resource which gives priority to creative uses of language and which, drawing on both canonical and everyday imaginative discourses, enables language teachers to exploit communicative repertoires of their learners.

Summary

As previously discussed, research has shown that there are numerous ways in which literature can be effectively used in ESL and EFL classrooms to promote language learners' different skills and overall proficiency. Any form of literature--poetry, short stories, novels or dramas--"generates essentials of language learning" (Heath, 1996, p. 776). By allowing language learners to read and re-read, write and re-write, respond to and interact with both the texts and other learners, as Heath points out, "literature has no rival in its power to create natural repetition, reflection on language and how it works, and attention to audience response on the part of learners" (p. 776).

However, it needs to be made clear at this point that literature is not a magic wand with which teachers can expect miraculous results with one wave. Rather, literature provides learners with valuable language experiences to serve different language purposes. In other words, Even though proponents of the literature-based language teaching approach advocate the use of literature as one valuable resource in language teaching, their ultimate goals of the approach vary (Lazar, 1993). Despite differences in terms of lesson objectives, literature is generally used as a basis for language practice which include such classroom activities as cloze, vocabulary practice, role-plays, journal writings, personal response, and group discussion, etc. Simply put, literature provides motivating language activities which heighten learners' comprehension of the target language, which, in turn, supports language production. The final outcome of comprehension and production is, certainly, successful acquisition of the target language which is the ultimate aim of any language teaching approach, including literature-based ones. In short, the use of literature promotes comprehension and production which are expected to result in successful acquisition of the target language.

Shrum and Glison (1994) emphasize benefits learners can gain from their interaction with authentic literary texts and, by citing Rice (1991), suggest three ways in which teachers can combine the teaching of language and authentic literary texts to

promote learners' comprehension and production of the target language:

1. define what we want students to do with literature and identify the skills they need: for example, trace a plot, describe characters, generate a poem that has similar sounds to the one they read;

2. introduce literature from the beginning levels of language instruction, designing the reading task according to the abilities of students: for example, beginning classes might figure out sound patterns of a poem, associate actions with emotions or responses, set up opposition between male and female characters in a story;

3. interrelate the proficiency concepts of function, context, and accuracy in developing an approach to teaching literature: for example, the literary equivalent of context might be the genre or type of text, function might be the operations the reader must perform in order to read or critique a particular type of text, and accuracy might include the vocabulary, grammar, and cognitive skills necessary for carrying out the functions. (pp. 117-118)

A realization that literature is a tool ESL and EFL teachers need to wisely make use of to realize its full potential will also help teachers set the goal of their literature-based lessons and select literary material accordingly. Whiteson's (1996) justification of literary selection to serve any instructional purposes is worth taking into account: "[d]oes the selection have to be good literature? Certainly not. It is important, however, to pick materials that will ultimately produce good conversation and writing" (p. 3).

Certainly, no matter what literary pieces teachers include in their selection, the most important requirement is that they have to be appropriately compatible with the learners' level of proficiency. At the same time, they should contain valuable cultural content which can help lead learners to greater understanding of the target culture as well as be suitable as a basis for thought-provoking classroom discussion and interaction. Finally, different genres of literature should be exploited, so learners will have a chance to experience the abundance of literary resources and learn to appreciate not only one but all options that are available to them.

The Author

Punchalee Wasanasomsithi graduated with a B.A. (2nd class honors) in English from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, a M.A. degree in Applied Linguistics and a Ph.D. in Language Education from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA. She is a lecturer of English at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. Her areas of interest include second language acquisition, learning strategy and literature-based language teaching.

References

Akyel, A., & Yalcin, E. (1990). Literature in the EFL class : A study of goal-achievement incongruence. *The ELT Journal, 44,* 174-180.

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1997). The place of second language acquisition in language teacher preparation. In K. Bardovi-Harlig & B. Hartford (Eds.), *Beyond methods : Components of second language teacher education* (pp. 18-41). New York : McGraw-Hill.

Bassnett, S., & Grundy, P. (1993). *Language through literature : Creative language teaching through literature.* London : Longman.

Brumfit, C.J. (1985). *Language and literature teaching : From practice to principle.* Oxford : Pergamon.

Bruner, J.S. (1988). Research currents : Life as narrative. *Language Arts, 65,* 574-583.

Candlin, C.N. (1996). General editor's preface. In R. Carter & J. McRae (Eds.), *Language, literature & the Learner* (pp. X-xvi). London : Longman.

Carter, R., & Long, M.N. (1987). *The web of words : Exploring literature through language.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Garter, R., & Long, M.N. (1990). Testing literature in EFL classes : Tradition and innovation. *The ELT Journal, 44,* 215-221.

Carter, R., & Long, M.N. (1991). *Teaching literature.* London : Longman.

Celce-Murcia, M. (1985). Making informed decisions about the vole of grammar in language teaching. *Foreign Language Annals, 18,* 297-301.

Duff, A., & Maley, A. (1990). *Literature.* Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Elliott, R. (1990). Encouraging reader-response to literature in ESL situations. *The ELT Journal, 44,* 191-198.

Gilroy, M. (1995). An investigation into teachers' attitudes to using literature in the language classroom. *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, 6,* 1-17.

Gwin, T. (1990). Language skills through literature. *English Teaching Forum, 28,* 10-13.

Heath, S.B. (1996). Re-creating literature in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly, 30,* 776-779.

Jones, B.F. (1985). Reading and thinking. In A.L. Costa (Ed.), *Developing minds : A resource book for teaching thinking* (pp. 108-113). Alexandria, VA : Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning.* Oxford: Pergamon.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practices in second language acquisition.* New York: Pergamon.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis.* New York : Longman.

Lazar, G. (1990). Using novels in the language learning classroom. *The ELT Journal,* *44,* 204-214.

Lazar, G. (1991). Using literature at lower levels. *The ELT Journal, 48,* 115-124.

Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching : A guide for teachers and trainers.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Lazar, G. (1996). Exploring literary texts with the language learner. *TESOL Quarterly,* *30,* 773-776.

Ling L.W. (1997). *Survey of the use of literature as resource in language teaching in schools in Singapore.* Unpublished bachelor's honors thesis, The National University of Singapore.

Little wood, W. (1981). *Communicative language teaching.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Maley, A. (1996). That's for your poetry book! In R. Cartor & J. McRae (Eds.), *Language, literature and the Learner : Creative Classroom practice* (pp. 100-114). London : Longman.

Marquardt, W.F. (1968).   Literature and cross-cultural communication. *English Teachign Forum, 6,* 8-10.

McKay, S. (1987). Literature in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly, 16,* 529-536.

McRae, J. (1991). *Literature with a small 'l'.* London : Macmillan.

Povey, J. (1967). Literature in TESL Programs : The language and the culture. *TESOL Quarterly, 1,* 40-46.

Pugh, S. (1989). Literature, culture, and ESL : A natural congruence. *Journal of Reading, 32,* 320-329.

Randall, W.L. (1995). *The stories we are : An essay on self-creation.* Toronto, Canada : University of Toronto Press.

Shrum, J.L., & Glisan, E.W. (1994). *Teachers' handbook : Contextualized language instruction.* Boston : Heinle & Heinle.

Spack, R. (1985). Literature, reading, writing, and ESL : Bridging the gap. *TESOL Quarterly, 19,* 703-721.

Whiteson, V. (1996). *New ways of using drama and literature in language teaching.* Alexandria, VA : Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages.

Widdowson, H.G. (1975). *Stylistic and the teaching of literature.* London : Longman.

Widdowson, H.G. (1982). The use of literature. In H.M. Hines & W. Rutherford (Eds.), *On TESOL '81.* Washington, DC : Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Widdowson, H.G. (1983). Talking shop : H.G. Widdowson on literature and ELT. *The ELT Journal, 37,* 30-35.