

Teaching Language in Context: Use of Short Stories to Teach Integrated Language Skills

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Abstract

This paper intends to present how Literature may be used in ESL classes to develop students' integrated skills, with special focus on developing communicative competence. The aim of this research is to initiate teachers of English as a second language into a task based approach to teach language. The goal of all language teaching in the present scenario is communicative competence. The use of a literary text, like a short story The Diamond Necklace is to provide a sample for the justification of the contention that teaching language in context is a more effective method of increasing communicative competence as well as learning grammar and vocabulary. A short story being a literary text provides ample scope for the integrative learning of the four skills, as diverse activities can be devised on a literary text. The methodology adopted is the application of interactive activities built on the text in the classroom, during the reading of the short story, so that contextualized learning results. The time frame of application for this methodology can be one semester, as the text being not a too long one can be exhaustively used for exploitation and subsequent application. It is worth mentioning that the results are amazing. Not only does a literary text engage students in its real life situations it initiates them into context based learning of vocabulary and grammatical structures. The most important finding is that through interactive activities based on the text, communicative competence is built.

Keywords: *Literature and language teaching, ESL, communicative competence, task based approach*

1. Introduction

Literature has been the primary source of teaching language traditionally. The grammar translation method was the usual practice followed by teachers in the second language classrooms. The problem with using literary texts in traditional classrooms was that the students were required either to summarize or translate these literary texts and the maximum that was done for language learning was memorizing vocabulary or grammatical structures. Emphasis was on comprehension exercises or précis making. As Khatib (2011) has pointed out language classrooms for EFL/ESL learners has been a boring affair, because they are usually engaged in activities which they find useless and unrelated to their everyday communicative competence needs, in out of class situations.

McKay (1982) argues that though literature has traditionally been used to teach language usage, it has rarely been used to develop language use. In spite of this the importance of using literature for the purpose of language teaching cannot be denied, as literature presents language in discourse and it is easier to teach from a text in which contextual learning and language of discourse

provides ample scope for language acquisition, than from courses devised specifically for functional English.

“The relevance of literature in this approach is, on the one hand, that it transmits messages. It is a way of communication between the author and the reader. On the other hand, literature pays special attention to form, and this helps the learner reflect about language” Llach (2007, pp. 7-17). This subscribes also to the goal of the communicative method. Teaching English is a multidimensional goal. Just as it is important to develop the linguistic competence of the learners, enabling them to express themselves meaningfully in English, it is also important to develop their communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of language teaching today. It should be kept in mind that this same learner is to interact and communicate in his practical life; he has to get his meaning across which is the basic objective and function of language. Literature is the best tool for this for it provides contextualized learning with authentic materials and provides scope and motivation to the learners for interaction.

Even today teachers are generally not trained to teach language having themselves studied these literary texts through the GTM and through the critical rhetorical method used to stylistically analyze the text. This style focuses more on comprehension than to cater to the communicative needs of the learners. Though there is in recent years a growing realization of the great potential of literary texts as a source of teaching second language contextually to the L2 learners. Hinkel (2006) has very convincingly pointed out that in this age of globalization, the pragmatic objectives of language learning today place an increasing importance on integrated learning through effective and multiskill instructional models which are dynamic and focus on development of learners' communicative competence through meaningful communication. Thus current theories of second language acquisition emphasize on teaching of the integrated four skills i.e reading, writing, listening and speaking. This debate is of great consequence in Pakistan's L2 learning scenario too; as our students though they do study literary texts are not initiated into integrative learning of the four skills through the literary text in their learning process. No activities are integrated in the teaching methodology to match the communicative needs of language learners. According to Khatib(2012) there has been a positive change all over the world and teachers of language have realized how much potential literary texts especially short stories and novels possess for the teaching and development of second language acquisition.

Literature is a storehouse of linguistic opportunities to the language learner. It allows the teacher to design activities that are based on material which is capable of stimulating greater interest and involvement in the students than many other non-literary, informative texts as Carter and Long(1991) have pointed out.. If teaching of linguistic forms like grammar and vocabulary is the objective, it should be contextualized for the students with the objective to focus on form and content through activities where learner interaction among students as well as the teacher should take place. The objective and ultimate goal of L2 teaching, (Maley, 1990) has pointed out is the enabling of the L2 learner to communicate orally and through writing, integrating the four skills through activities which are multidimensional. Literature becomes relevant as it has the power to transmit messages and establish communication between the author and the reader. With its emphasis on form students learn through contextualized reading and thus develop linguistic competence by learning. Learners not only understand meaning but also understand how this

meaning is constructed as well as express what they understand through the use of vocabulary gained from the literary text. Thus exposure to vocabulary and grammatical structures in real life contexts help them to use language and construct meaning through the learnt vocabulary. They learn to communicate which is the ultimate objective of L2 teaching. Literature as a teaching tool has its justification in the fact that it provides authentic linguistic and cultural material, motivating interaction among learners. Explicating this contention Kong(2008), Met (1998), and Wolff (2002) all reiterate that literary texts enhance students language learning significantly, because the L2 develops to its higher levels only if students are learning through more challenging contents which entails more challenging use of language.

2. Justification of the Research

This research is conducted on a class of 50 students of BS Hons first year, in the LCWU studying English as L2. They have a mixed socio lingual background, as there are students who have Urdu or Punjabi as their L1. The rationale for this research is to show how important it is to choose literature and authentic literary texts for integrative skills to be developed and to teach language i.e. grammar and vocabulary contextually. Generally grammar is taught through practice exercises, drills and grammar books without relating it to real life situations; the result being that no visible contextualized learning of language results. In this research it is aimed to establish the relevant role of literature as a resource for second language teaching. Much scholarly writings reiterate the positive impact of the use of literature to teaching language as they affirm that students in this way gain familiarity with different linguistic forms.

English is taught as a compulsory subject in Pakistan, but unfortunately inspite of years of teaching the students remain ignorant of linguistic forms, sentence structure, vocabulary and communicative ability. One of the main reasons is that at every level from primary to tertiary to undergraduate levels literary texts are used and the GMT method focuses on rote learning and uncontextualized teaching of grammar through drill practices. What is needed is contextualized teaching of grammar and vocabulary through authentic literary texts so that the students are exposed to real life contexts to comprehend linguistic forms. This is the reason a study is under taken through this research to assess how much language learning is achieved and progressed through the interactive use of literary texts at the undergraduate level.

For structural and functional-notional approach literature was discredited as a tool for a long period of time. According to Duff and Maley (1998) however, the interest in literature as one of the most valuable teaching resource has revived greatly. The reason is that literature offers authentic material for teaching a language. The students therefore have to cope with language intended for native speakers without simplification and adaptation for foreign learners, enabling the learners to gain familiarity with different linguistic forms and uses. The positive aspect is that literary works provide a rich context that shows lexical and syntactical items in use making them more memorable. According to Carter (1993) reading a literary text helps the second language learner acquire not only more vocabulary, meanings and uses of the words giving them lexical competence; it also contributes to develop syntactic knowledge.

3. Methodology

The reason I have chosen the genre of short story to teach language in context is that it is possible to teach it in a limited period of specified time for a class. It can give a single effect with a few characters and a single plot, so it also does not confuse the learner. It creates a closer to real life experience to the learner stimulating interesting topics for classroom and group discussions. It provides the students opportunity to first empathize and then possibly act out situations. It helps them to rewrite the text using their personal similar experience, or relying on their imagination to recreate similar situations thus generating lots of group participation, vocabulary use and language generation. In such situation grammatical constructions can be reinforced through practice and students can be encouraged to create other grammatical constructions on the sample text. As Edmondson (1997, p.47) contends “for language teachers, what is at issue is the value of literature for language learning, and not the value of literature per se”. This is important as it aids in expansion of vocabulary, by teaching word forms and common expressions. Literature Povey (1972) expostulates increases all language skills as it extends linguistic knowledge by actively using extensive vocabulary and its usage in context through an appropriate syntax which may vary according to the context. Thus the focus of teaching literature should not be to present it as an illustration of good writing, or of grammatical rules with emphasis on learning them along with the lexical items, but to construct them as real life experiences by devising such activities that provide them learning at first hand of the grammatical constructs using contextualized vocabulary and conceptual comprehension with exact syntax. In Halliday’s (1993) opinion language learning occurs through actively engaging in learning through language use.

4: Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to prove that language acquisition is not possible without being exposed to the use of language in context. This is only possible through literary texts as their literary content is appropriate for learning language as well as language acquisition. Even if the aim of teaching literary texts is learning content, it is only possible through learning language first. Thus it becomes imperative, “that both content and language learning make good progress with each CBI lesson” (Halliday,1993;Lyster,2007;Mohan, 1986).

As the objective of this study is to gain results through implementing the specified methodology by using language in context, I have chosen the short story *The Diamond Necklace* from the BS (Hons) English compulsory course. This story is taken from a collection of short stories which is one segment of the English course, aimed at teaching language through literary texts, as well as creating an aesthetic awareness of literature. It has been selected because of its rich contextual relevance and interest for the students to work upon. It provides ample scope to devise activities, to teach grammar, vocabulary and interactive skills i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking. Since the length of short-stories vary, it is important to choose a story short enough to handle within the stipulated course hours. The shortness of the text is of strategic importance in this technique of teaching language for the students, because it will give them a sense of achievement and confidence if they are able to finish reading in stipulated time along with gaining comprehension too. Hill (1994, p. 15) enumerates the three essential criteria for choosing a literary text: “ (1) the needs and abilities of the students; (2) the linguistic and stylistic level of the text; (3) the amount of background information required for a true appreciation of the material”. Thus it is important to focus not only on the length of the literary text but also all three of the above factors too.

Generally the number of students in public sector institutions in our country is great. For example there are 11000 students studying English at different levels from intermediate to post graduate in the LCWU. The problem of teaching English as a second language is of a great magnitude. To attain a level of L2 proficiency through the prescribed uniform literary text is an uphill task, as students come from different proficiency levels. The teachers who are not trained in the techniques of teaching are unable to exploit the text for teaching all linguistic forms so they cling to the old method of comprehension questions and stylistic analysis and summarizing the text. This research is motivational too, to initiate teachers to exploit literary texts for acquisition of the integrated skills of L2.

This research is conducted at the tertiary or BS level and a group of 50 students are initially selected for application of the techniques of teaching language through integrative activities based on literary text for contextualized learning. It is pertinent that the text selected is from the BS English syllabus and the reason for its selection is to show to the ESL teachers how a literary text can be exploited through devising activities on it so that not only grammar but reading, writing, listening and speaking can be taught. Sample activities have been given in this paper to initiate teachers into teaching literary text through contextualization so that learning of integrated skills occurs. The period of research in which this methodology is applied is four months or one semester. It gives a fair idea of the amount of integrated learning, vocabulary and grammar acquisition results which results.

The implementation of the technique of teaching language in context entails a step by step analysis of results collected to gauge success. Data collection for analysis is important. So is classroom observation, to assess student participation in interactive activities devised on the text. Written materials are specifically developed from the text for the practice on grammatical structures using real life situations from the text. Speaking exercises are specially developed to enhance communicative skills. They also help to carry out analysis of conversational competence gained through the in context language learning. Assessment of the level of acquisition is important for data analysis to get a proper feedback of the integrative contextualized language teaching and learning. Verbal and written data is important to examine the pattern of recurring mistakes, so that revised methodology is applied. The objective of all activities is enabling students to acquire language and communicative competence as well as gain meaningful knowledge through language proficiency.

In order to gauge level of language proficiency of the selected group a pretest would be taken to assess the proficiency level of the learners and subsequently after the semester ends a post test is to be taken to assess the progress and development in that level to establish the hypotheses that better language learning results from using literary texts to teach language, from learner feedback.

Following the suggestions of Khatib et al. (2011) who propose a task-based approach to the teaching of literature in the language classes, a teaching scheme consisting of three stages would be adopted. The first phase is pre task, the second during task, and the third is post task. The following section of this paper introduces the teachers to this task based approach which allows a lot of scope for exploitation of the text as well as opportunities to the students to not only improve

their language learning skills but also to do reflective learning. To achieve integrative skills these activities and tasks induce language learning. These activities are immersion inducing too as the language used is English.

The phase of the pre tasks is important as brain storming activities arouse learners' interest, elicit background knowledge and pre concepts of things and introduce them to relate to authentic literary texts to be read in class.

The short story I have chosen to work upon for use in classroom activities and teaching language through literature is *The Diamond Necklace* from the course book of the BS Hons syllabus at LCWU. It is incomparable for its short succinctness, pertinacity of theme, and scope for exploitation for multiskill activities especially lexical and syntactical teaching.

The principle of good communicative teaching is to arouse the student's interest through simple evocation of student response, this is done by evoking interest in the literary text through short evocative and associative questions from real life which may allude to the story being taught. This is called the brain storming method as each student is given a chance to contribute.

5: Activities

Activity 1: Brain Storming

Teacher: Have you been to a party lately? Anybody would like to share how it was like? Was it fun, was it interesting? Do you like going to parties? What is a ball? Do you think a ball is different from a party?

Why was this party thrown? Share an interesting thing about it. How were the women dressed? Can someone describe the dresses men and women were wearing? Were the women wearing jewelry? Was anyone wearing a necklace? Just imagine what would happen if a woman lost a borrowed precious necklace.

The class is asked all these questions and responses and answers are elicited from them. This brain storming arouses interest, activates them mentally. They learn the meaning of a new word 'ball' through use in context. The word being culturally unfamiliar elicits varied responses and language generation also occurs. The teacher then plays a short video of a ball from one of the classic movies to make them familiar with the costumes and dances in a ball.

Activity 2: Reading

Reading aloud in the class is a very good activity to initiate students' fluency in spoken language. They get to read and pronounce difficult words, as well as provide exposure to contextual language by hearing what is read. According to Pardede (2011) reading out short stories (literary texts) is very useful in developing students vocabulary and developing reading skills, studies reveal that those who read literary texts made a lot of improvement in acquisition of vocabulary than those who do not read literary texts.

Thus the students are asked to read aloud one paragraph each, of the text turn by turn. The students are then asked to reframe the sequence of the events turn by turn.

Activity 3: This activity is designed to assess the student's comprehension of the text as well as teach them vocabulary through discrimination and mind application with reference to the text.

They are instructed to match the meanings of the words given on the left column with those given in the right column. This activity is designed to make students familiar with difficult words and by learning their meanings become independent users of language. Instructions: Match the words with their appropriate meaning.

	Distinguished	Irritation
	Inestimable	Strong excitement
	Coquettish	A passage between the outer doors. Foyer
	Tureen	Disquietude
	Personages	Lack of what is needed for existence
	Vexation	Too valuable
	Enthusiasm	A covered dish
	Vestibule	A person of distinction
	Chagrin	To deal with something playfully and non seriously
	Privations	Eminent

Activity 4: Grammatical Practice

This activity has been specifically designed for the students to understand the meaning and the context of the given words /phrases from the story to help students understand how words stand contextually in a story and to enable them to use these words in a further exercise.

This is a simple but interesting activity which incurs grammatical learning through identification. This activity can be carried out by making two columns everyday from various portions of the text.

Column one is left blank. The second column has all the words and phrase.

Instructions: Fill out the column by stating before each word whether it is a noun or an adjective.

Activity 5: Circle the regular verbs with red in *The Diamond Necklace*. Also circle irregular verbs with green. Make columns of simple past, present perfect, conditional verbs and put the circled words in their appropriate columns. Underline all the modal verbs too.

Activity 6: Semantic Exercise. This is to further enhance the contextual meaning of the new vocabulary learnt, from the short story. The students are required to use memory with learning of language used in context.

Fill in the following sentences from words in column two.

- a.) To their ----- they found the necklace was missing.
- b.) Her ----- for the party was great.
- c.) The mansion had paintings of ----- value.
- d.) After facing ----- for many years they were able to pay off their debts.
- e.) The ball was attended by distinguished -----.
- f.) To her ----- she found out she had nothing to wear for the party.
- g.) She stood indecisively in the ----- afraid to enter in the hall full of people.
- h.) She was served soup in a steaming -----.
- i.) Her ----- behavior embarrassed her husband.
- j.) He is very ----- in his profession.

Activity 7: Writing activity for vocabulary. This activity would reinforce vocabulary acquisition. Instructions: Use words given in column two in your own sentences so that the meaning is made clear.

Activity 7: Writing Activity

One of the most important aspects of language learning is linguistic competence in writing. Teachers should encourage students to write to enable them to express in the written word the vocabulary acquired through the reading of the literary text and to express themselves grammatically and coherently. Not only student writings can be modeled on literary texts, as they learn to imitate the original text in its style, organization and content they can also be initiated to write independently. Literature is the greatest stimulator and inspirer to readers and often creativity is stimulated by these writings.

Oster (1989, p. 85) in his article stresses the role of literature in the creative use of language and its development in a learner.

The necklace can be a good source of generating writing activity.

Instructions:

1. Pretend to be Matilda and in a sentence write how you felt when you discovered the necklace was lost.
2. Create a dialogue of ten lines between Mr. and Mrs. Loisel discussing ways to get out of the agonizing debt and then write it down.
3. Assume the role of Mr. Loisel and write in a paragraph what you had to sacrifice by the loss of the necklace
4. Imagine you are Mrs. Forrestier, write down in ten lines what would be your reaction after hearing Matilda's painful story.

5. Do you think Mrs. Forrestier would give back the necklace? Write down your argument in ten lines.

Listening and Speaking Activity:8

For integrative learning speaking and listening is very important. This research paper is designed to enable students to acquire multiskill learning of language. Literary texts are an effective mode of teaching speaking and listening skills as these texts motivate student interaction, debate, discussion and improvisation as well as dramatization. Contextual learning can result through recreating real life situations out of the literary text in this case a short story, and situations can be re enacted and replayed. In the reading stage students were asked to read the story aloud each student made to read a paragraph. It was intended to maintain interest of the students as well as exposing them to pronunciation and new vocabulary.

In this listening speaking stageteachers can work on following activities to develop the speaking listening skills of the learners.

Speaking Activity:9

1. Two very short stories are cut into sets of paragraph strips and the class is divided into two groups. To each group one set of story strips is distributed randomly. Both the groups are given 15 minutes and asked to sequence their story. This way a lot of group discussion and vocabulary use results.
2. As a follow up activity to the above after the sequencing is completed students are asked to read out aloud the story in the sequenced form each student taking his turn according to the sequenced order. This activity not only generates language usage enabling students to develop vocabulary, it improves the organizational skills of the students. It also enables them to understand cohesive discourse, gives confidence to the learners as they get an opportunity to speak in class.
3. Role playing is an interesting activity making the students to act out situations from the story, generating vocabulary and communication in this integrative multiskill English language classroom.
4. Act out an argument of ten to fifteen lines between Loisel and Matilda where they are blaming each other for what happened.
5. You are in a police station .Pretending to be Loisel record your statement to the police telling them of the lost necklace and your subsequent search.
6. Imagine you are Matilda and you are talking to your friends; give them advice on why contentment is important from your experience of life.

Listening Skill Activity:10

It is important to make the students good listeners as only good listeners can be good communicators and learners. To initiate students to listening activities if available a video or sound recording of the story can be played in class.

1. Divide the class in pairs. One partner whispers a single line dialogue from the text. The other partner is asked to repeat the dialogue in indirect speech. This is an excellent inter skill learning activity in an interactive classroom.

2. Small question answer session can also be an effective speaking listening activity. The class can be divided into pairs and one partner is to ask a question and the other is to answer. The teacher can in this activity work out numerous questions and assign at least two to each pair.

The questions can be as following:

- a. Who are the two main characters of the story the Diamond Necklace?
- b. Why isn't Matilda happy?
- c. What does Matilda dream of?
- d. What does Loisel do?
- e. Who invites them to a party?

These are just a few questions, and many more can be constructed from the text. This is not only a good activity for speaking practice it is also excellent for comprehension purpose.

3. Suppose you were at the ball, recount your observation of Matilda during this eventful evening. Ask a second student to repeat the observation in his own words. (Check for how much listening and speaking occurs in this activity.
4. Ask the students to relate similar incidents from real life situations.
5. Ask a student to pretend she was Matilda and tell if she were to begin again what would be her actions.

All these activities are student centered having a task based approach. The purpose is to establish the hypotheses that effective language learning can be achieved through teaching literary texts using task based approach for multiskill integrated learning.

6. Discussion

This research used authentic literary texts over a period of one semester/four months. As the students are initiated into the literary text and taught how to learn language and build vocabulary through learning language in context, the text chosen is used exhaustively. Further texts can be selected from the prescribed syllabus. One interesting and rich text can be Shakespeare's play Macbeth. It provides ample scope for language use, dramatization through role playing, and focusing on grammatical structures through various utterances in the play. A linguistic analysis of Macbeth's character can be done through the analysis of his choice of words. A dramatic texts lends itself to learning language in context in a very productive manner. It has a high contextual content as well as scope for exploiting for different multiskill activities such as grammar and vocabulary in contextualized settings, listening reading writing and speaking. This research being applicable to the teaching/ learning situation of the researcher herself is exploratory too. The best method to learn language from context is through the direct method of using language from the text under use for interactive communicative purposes. L2 acquisition is a two way process as the brain processes the language it is exposed to before its use. The second objective was to find out if integrated acquisition of L2 is possible by teaching language through literary texts and contextualized learning. This is proved successfully after the elapse of some as absorption and processing needs time.

This research involves procedures in natural classroom setting, and it is spread over a concentrated contact period of one semester initially. It was conducted very systematically, encompassing many aspects of grammar and vocabulary and integrated to the study scheme of the students. The research was based on personal observation and the feedback response was taken through pretests and posttests as well as verbal analysis was done to see the emerging patterns of learning. There was no prior theory involved except a hypothesis to verify that second language acquisition especially linguistic components like grammar and vocabulary as well as integrated learning can be better acquired if students are exposed to authentic literary texts.

7. Results

This research is an exploration to find out what learning proficiency in grammar and vocabulary, as well as integrative skills could result by the use of authentic literary materials and contextualized learning, instead of drills and practice exercises in grammar teaching. The results were amazing as it was observed that the student's interest in language learning grew. They were able to use gained vocabulary in conversations. The most exciting result of employing this technique in the language class was that the class became very interactive. They looked forward to the English class because it provided them space and opportunity to learn actively. All four skills were focused on along with grammar and semantics. Student participation in the English classroom grew which was an indication of successful language acquisition, for they were no more shy to utter words or express themselves. The English class no longer remained boring and beyond their scope of learning. It provided scope for the teacher to exploit other literary texts in the same way in the ESL classroom

8. Conclusion

The purpose in fact was to generate a hypothesis that would support the topic that the use of literary texts in ESL classrooms could result in better language learning. This study conducted in real classroom situations in which access to a class of students in controlled setting was available, enabled the researcher to gather valuable relevant information through first hand observation, formal lesson plans, written work assessment and verbal /oral exercises based on the literary texts and formal and informal interaction based on textual situations contextualized in the form of activities designed on the literary text. It is also definitive as a clear difference is seen in the pre test position of learners and the consequent posttest upon feedback of learners after using a literary text to teach communicative competence to students. The teacher is the best judge. Classroom assessments have helped to establish the validity of the research making it viable for further use and exploitation of other literary texts. To sum up it would also be appropriate to emphasize the role of the ESL teacher in the language classroom as she is responsible of exploiting literary texts for such activities which can really help students in contextual integrative skill acquisition. The researcher being a teacher herself brings her own observations after these devised activities applied in the language classroom to make the English language classroom an interesting place for L2 acquisition through interesting literary texts.

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