The Relevance of Teaching Different Literary Genres in the EFL Classroom

Dr.Halima Benzoukh

Kasdi Merbah University –Ouargla

Algeria

Abstract

Each literary genre is characterized by its own language patterns, its specific stylistic choices and its patterns of cultural orientation. Novels and short stories, for example, take advantage of their setting and plot to expand new degrees of realism. Plays, in contrast, are mainly around characters and their interactions, and they are written to be performed on stage. However, poetry is known of its various forms; it controls standard expectations about usage. Therefore, this paper comes to cast light on the importance of using various literary genres in EFL classes. Understanding these genres can help both teachers and students to be aware of their benefits in any classroom and to overcome the mismatch between literature as a content-based subject and literature as a rich authentic material used in language classes.

Key Words: literary genre, novel, short story, play, poetry, EFL class.

الملخص

يتميز كل نوع أدبي بأنماط لغته الخاصة، وخياراته الأسلوبية المميزة وأنماطه من التوجه الثقافي. تعتمد الروايات و القصص القصيرة، على سبيل المثال، على البعدين الزماني و المكاني و تطورات الأحداث لتوسيع نطاقات جديدة من الواقعية. وعلى النقيض من ذلك، فإن المسرحيات تتمحور حول الشخصيات وتفاعلاتها مع بعضها البعض، وهي مكتوبة ليتم تنفيذها على خشبة المسرح. أما عن الشعر فهو معروف بأشكاله المختلفة. و لذلك يأتي هذا البحث لإلقاء الضوء على أهمية استخدام مختلف الأنواع الأدبية في فصول الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. يمكن أن يساعد فهم هذه الأنواع المعلمين والطلاب على حد سواء ليكونوا على بينة من فوائدها في أي فصل، و لرفع اللبس عن عدم التطابق الحاصل بين الأدب باعتباره المادة القائمة على المحتوى والأدب كمادة غنية مستخدمة في دروس اللغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النوع الأدبي، الرواية، القصة القصيرة، المسرحية، الشعر، فصل الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

1. Introduction

Tackling literary genres is closely related to typologies of creative writing based on forms, outlooks, structures and purposes (Wetherill, 1974). It is thus common to classify literature into three main genres which are prose-fiction, poetry and drama (Lazar, 2007). These three major forms are linked with stylistics (Leech & Short, 1981).

There are three main forms of literature, including prose, poetry and drama. Though each form has its own peculiarities, the reader needs to note that the characteristics of one may be met in the other (Wetherill, 1974). For instance, there may be a poetic prose or a dramatic poetry (Gardiner, 2008).

2. The Importance of Using Novels in Language Teaching

Using novels in language classrooms is a valuable tool for mastering not only the linguistic system, but also the culture of the target language (Lazar, 2007). In most novels,

characters usually reflect the writer's society. Teaching novels in EFL classes has its educational value: novels develop students' cultural knowledge, increase their motivation to read owing to being authentic texts, present real life like settings, and give students the opportunity to improve their critical thinking skills, enabling them to go beyond what is printed (ibid.).

Using novels stimulates students' imagination and helps them to discover the emotions of various characters, so that they can find out how others deal with situations similar to their own experiences (Martino & Block, 1992). Using this literary genre can serve as a springboard for a multitude of holistic learning activities starting with basic comprehension since novels offer distinctive methods of teaching reading by getting learners involved in the reading process (ibid.).

The EFL teacher, when selecting a novel to be used in his/her classroom, should consider whether the chosen novel has a stimulating story that interests students, themes and settings that captivate their imagination, a powerful plot and memorable characters. The content of the novel should fit the learners' cognitive and emotional levels (Lazar, 2007).

When assessing comprehension, teachers can use novel tests asking students to develop the sub-skills of writing like spelling, grammar and punctuation (ibid.). The tests consist of both fact-based questions for evaluating comprehension and open-ended questions for improving critical thinking skills. Class discussions of each novel should embrace the central idea and supporting details of its main events. Social issues which are an essential part of the plot may create an attention-grabbing debate that helps in facilitating vocabulary development (Collie & Slater, 1993).

In a nutshell, using novels is a useful technique in foreign language classes. A carefully selected novel makes the students' literature lesson motivating and entertaining. Most students face difficulties in reading novels written in a foreign language. However, using this literary genre in language classes can build vocabulary and develop reading comprehension skills. In this case, EFL students may expand their horizons, get familiar with other cultures, and thus develop their intercultural communicative competence (Durant et al, 2000).

Interviewing learners, the teacher can set up the aim of the literature course. S/he can thus select the suitable language teaching techniques and classroom activities. The teacher ought to select the literary texts that are relevant to the objectives of his/her course. When choosing a literary text in the EFL classroom, the learners' language proficiency and concerns ought to be considered in order to grab their attention. At advanced levels at university, students are introduced to literary materials in their original form so that they can build up their literary competence in EFL. In other words, students can understand the aesthetic use of the target language in the different genres of literature. Examining how characters in a literary work use figures of speech to express their communicative intentions, EFL learners discover how to start writing in English more creatively and effectively (Collie & Slater, 1990).

Novels can be used as a good source in EFL classes. University students are the level of learners who can make good use of novels in learning EFL. Using novels in the EFL classroom is a helpful technique for teaching any foreign language. Selecting the suitable novel is the main element of the process. At this point, students' proficiency level, age and interests should be taken into account. Another important factor is the course goals and the suitability of the novel as content.

The choice of novels, primarily those for EFL students, varies. Numerous notions of a fine novel are given by many scholars. According to Marckwardt (1981), a good literature is written to entertain since it is psychologically and rationally significant. Lazar (2007) maintains that a good novel suggests multifaceted dilemmas and involves the language learners emotionally, linguistically and intellectually. Martino and Block (1992) also claim that an

appropriate novel for any language classroom ought to force students to raise various questions. Therefore, a novel that is suitable for foreign language students should have accessibility linguistically, literarily and culturally.

3. The Importance of Using Short Stories in Language Teaching

Short fiction is a good way for noticing not only language, but life itself (Collie & Slater, 1993). In short fiction, characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in their daily life, and do so in a variety of registers and tones (Lazar, 2007). The world of short fiction reflects the human life (Sage, 1989). The use of such a genre in the EFL context has many educational benefits (ibid.). It makes students' reading easier due to being simple when compared with the other literary genres (Murdoch, 2002). In addition, it enlarges the readers' worldviews about various cultures (ibid.). Further, it presents more creative and challenging texts that require personal exploration supported with prior knowledge for readers. Short fiction also motivates students to read due to being an authentic material and it introduces a world of wonders and ambiguity (Collie & Slater, 1990).

Moreover, it makes students use their creativity and it helps them to promote their critical thinking skills (Lazar, 2007). Besides, it aids in teaching any foreign culture (ibid.). Short stories help students from different cultural backgrounds to discuss various matters with each other because of their universal themes. They also assist students to understand themselves as well as the others by transmitting the gained knowledge to their own world.

In brief, using short stories is useful in any language class. As they are short, they make the reading task easier. Moreover, short stories, like all other literary genres, contribute to the development of cognitive analytical abilities by bringing the whole self to bear on a compressed account of a situation in a certain moment (Sage, 1989).

4. The Importance of Using Poetry in Language Teaching

Using poems can aid to learn and to teach the target language skills (Burton, 1984). Because most poetry intentionally or unintentionally uses metaphor as one of its principal features, poetry offers a noteworthy learning process (Collie & Slater, 1990). Many learning benefits can be derived from studying poetry, including appreciating the writer's composition process, which students get by studying poems by components, and developing sensitivity for words and discoveries that may later grow into a deeper interest (ibid.). Hall (2003) also explains the educational benefits of poetry. He maintains that it first provides readers with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the known rules of grammar and syntax; second, it triggers unmotivated readers owing to being so open to diverse interpretations; third, it evokes feelings and thoughts, and finally it makes students familiar with figures of speech due to their being a part of daily language use. Unlike the other genres, poetry is written in verse which makes it different and difficult from the ordinary language. Maley and Moulding state that:

> The range of the materials currently available to the teachers of English is wide and varied. Magazine and newspaper articles, advertisements, brochures, technical instruction manuals, business letters, and so on are all drawn up a great effect. But poetry is all too often left to one side. So the aim of the English teacher should be to make poetry accessible to the students of EFL/ESL: to make it possible for them to read and enjoy it. (Maley & Moulding, 1985: 28)

Besides, Preston (1982) states that poetry is a rewarding and enjoyable experience with the properties of rhyming and rhythm both of which convey appreciation for the power of

language. At this juncture, it can be stated that students become familiar with the supra-segmental aspects of the target language, such as stress, pitch and intonation.

Through poetry, students can also study the semiotic elements in the target language (Leech, 1969). Semiotic elements represent a cultural training as well (ibid.). Hanauer (1997) claims that poems should be seen as hyper-signs of which constituent semiotic signifiers come together in their common link and lead to the symbolic level which is the one inclined to be signified in a poem. Tosta tackles a number of good reasons to integrate poetry into the EFL classroom:

> One reason is that poems usually deal with universal themes, such as love or hate, which are familiar to all readers. Secondly, poems bring contexts which are not only rich culturally but also linguistically. There is also the additional advantage of length, which makes many poems easy to remember and thus well suited to a single classroom lesson. Even the myth of complexity can be positively approached and serve as a motivational factor, since students will have a feeling of accomplishment as they successfully work with a poem in class. (Tosta, 1996: 62).

Poetry employs language to evoke and exalt special qualities of life (Burton, 1984). It is particularly lyric poetry which is based on feelings and provides still another emotional benefit (ibid.). Poetry is one of the most effective and powerful transmitters of culture. Poems comprise so many cultural elements- allusions, vocabulary, idioms and tone that are usually difficult to translate into another language (Sage, 1989).

5. The Importance of Using Drama in Language Teaching

Using drama in a language classroom is a good resource for language teaching (Lazar, 2007). EFL students may get familiar with a variety of grammatical forms in various contexts and know how to use the language to express themselves through using this literary genre (ibid.). Drama makes EFL learners aware of the target language culture. Therefore, the target language and the context of drama should fuse into a learning process with high interest and enjoyment. EFL students ought to use drama to promote their understanding of life experiences and make sense of their extra-linguistic world (Saricoban, 2004). In fact, drama can be used to stimulate learners' imagination, develop their critical thinking skills and promote language development (Lenore, 2007). Drama also brings authenticity into the classroom, exposes students to the target culture, enhances their understanding of literature, and enables them to develop new literary readings (Wessels, 1987).

As a result, using drama is an effective technique teachers can have recourse to in any learner-centred classes since it promotes their students' comprehension of the verbal and the nonverbal features of the target language (Lenore, 2007). Drama is considered as the reenactment of social and realistic scenes, and thus students have the opportunity to improve their personality (ibid.).The following figure summarizes the reasons behind having recourse to plays in the language classroom:
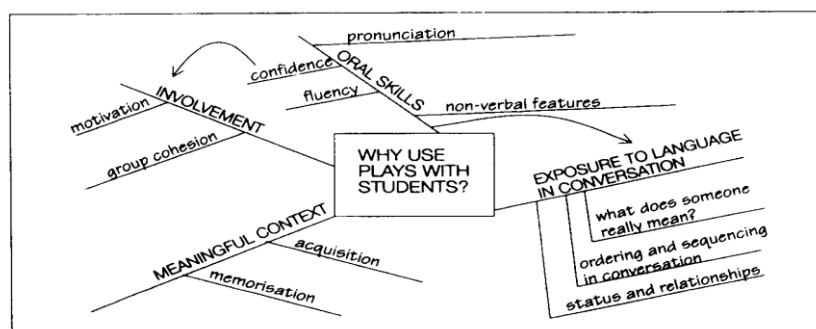
Using Plays in the Language Classroom (Lazar, 2007)

Many studies have been held on using drama in the EFL classroom. Drama in EFL can involve students emotionally and cognitively in the learning process (Collie & Slater, 1990). It gives learners an opportunity to explore linguistic and conceptual aspects of the target language. Using drama also provides cultural enrichment (ibid.). All this gives the EFL teacher an option of designing more learner-centered activities.

6. Conclusion

Obediat (1997) maintains that using literature in the EFL classroom can help students learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication and how to be critical and analytical learners. Custodio and Sutton (1998) claim that any literary text can unlock doors of possibility, giving an opportunity for students to explore the writer's world. Literature can be regarded as a rich source of authentic material over a variety of registers. If students can get access to this material by developing literary competence, then they can effectively internalize the language at a high level (Elliot, 1990). Literature is not only a tool for developing the writing and speaking skills of the learners in the target language, but also is a window opening into its culture, building up their cultural competence.

References

Burton, R. (1984). *How to Read a Poem*. New York: New American Library.

Collie, J. & Slater, S. (1990). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collie, J. & Slater, S. (1993). *Short Stories for Creative Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Custodio, B. & Sutton, M. (1998). "Literature-based ESL for Secondary School Students". In *TESOL Journal*, 7(5). (pp. 19-23).

Durant, A. et al. (2000). *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature* (2nd ed.). London and New York: Routledge.

Elliot, R. (1990). "Encouraging Reader-response to Literature in ESL Situations". In *ELT Journal*, 44(3). (pp. 191-198).

Gardiner, A. (2008). *English Literature*. London: Pearson Education Limited.

Hall, G. (2003). "Poetry, Pleasure, and Second Language Learning Classrooms". In *Applied Linguistics*, 24 (3). (pp. 395-399).

Hanauer, D. (1997). "Poetry Reading in the Second Language Classroom. In *Language Awareness*, 6 (1). (pp. 2-16).

Lazar, G. (2007). *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leech, G. N. (1969). *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longman.

Leech, G. N. & Short, M. H. (1981). *Style in Fiction*. London: Longman.

Lenore, K. L. (2007). *The Creative Classroom: A Guide for Using Creative Drama in Classroom*. USA: Elsevier, Inc.

Maley, A. & Moulding, S. (1985). *Poem into Poem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marckwardt, A. H. (1981). "What Literature to Teach". In *English Teaching Forum*, xix (1). (pp. 2-7).

Martino, M. & Block, E. (1992). "Let Them Read Books". In *College ESL,* 2 (2). (pp. 12-20).

Murdoch, G. (2002). "Exploiting Well-known Short Stories for Language Skills Development". In *IATEFL LCS SIG Newsletter*, 23. (pp. 9-17).

Obediat, M. (1997). "Language vs. Literature in English Departments in the Arab World". In *English Teaching Forum,* 35 (1). (pp. 30-37).

Preston, W. (1982). "Poetry Ideas in Teaching Literature and Writing to Foreign Students". In *TESOL Quarterly*, *16* (4). (pp. 489-502).

Sage, H. (1989). *Incorporating Literature in ESL Instruction*. New Jersy: Prentice Hall.

Saricoban, A. (2004). "Using Drama in Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language". In *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*. No.14. (pp. 13-32).

Tosta, A. L. (1996). "Poetry? It's Worth a Try!". In *English Teaching Forum*, 34(3). (pp. 18-23).

Wessels, C. (1987). *Drama.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wetherill, P. M. (1974). *Literary Text: An Examination of Critical Methods*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.