

**Using Literature in Reading English as Second/Foreign Language**

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## Abstract

Literature has long been used as a source for reading materials in English as a first language (L1). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in utilizing literature in second language (L2) classrooms. The present article assumes that using literature in L2 reading can have the same effect as in L1. Integrating literature into L2 learning can create a learning environment that will provide comprehensible input and a low affective filter. Literary texts may be used in both extensive and intensive reading. Use of different literary genres is discussed with a special focus on the benefits of using stories.

## Introduction

According to Langer (1995, p. 5): “Literature plays a critical role in our life, often without our notice. It helps us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be..... In its best sense, literature is intellectually provocative as well as humanizing, allowing to use various angles of vision to examine thoughts, beliefs, and actions.”

Langer (1997, p. 613) describes the traditional second language classroom in which literature is absent. In such classroom, learners do not have a chance to practice language through personal and meaningful engagement and are often limited to studying language in texts through low-level literal questions. Learners “are often given short passages and fill in exercises meant to develop their English skills before being provided with context that permits them to use those skills in interesting and meaningful ways.” Consequently, such reading experience can have a negative effect on students’ attitude to and confidence in reading authentic materials, and may often lead to reluctance in reading in English for pleasure (Cho and Krashen, 2001).

## Benefits of Using Literature

With reference to the benefits of using literature in language learning, Collie and Slater (1990, p. 3) state that there are four reasons for using literature in the classroom: *valuable*

*authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement.* Furthermore, Heath (1996, p. 776) indicates that “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.” Thus, integrating literature into L2 learning can create a learning environment that will provide comprehensible input and a low affective filter (Rodrigo et al., 2004).

Strong (1996, p. 291) also argues that literature should form an important part of any language teaching class because it offers a rich source for learning reading. Literature may form part of communicative pedagogy in three different ways: 1) providing a context for in which to develop students’ reading strategies and knowledge of non-fiction and literary texts; 2) forming the basis for an extensive reading program with the attendant acquisition of new vocabulary as well as grammatical forms; 3) offering the opportunity to explore cross-cultural values.

Widdowson (1977, p. 36) draws our attention to the important point that literary texts have a unique advantage over non-literary ones. Literary texts depend heavily on the reader’s interpretation. A literary work is “separate, self-contained” with its language structured into “patterns of recurring sounds, structures and meanings” on symbolic and thematic levels.

Recent research shows that literature can play a positive role in L2 learning (Cho, Ahn, and Krashen, 2005; Hess, 2006). Learners show increase in vocabulary (Wang and Guthrie, 2004), and significant gain in reading comprehension (Holden, 2003). In addition, literature provides L2 learners with a combination of pleasurable and comprehensible texts (Krashen, 2004). This will help learners to develop a positive attitude towards reading in a second language. This positive attitudinal change is likely to lead to more independent reading which can be beneficial for their language acquisition (Kim, 2004). According to Dornyei (2005, p. 112), using literature in the classroom can help in “creating an overall positive motivational climate in the classroom.” Creating a rich literature second language environment will enhance learners’ intrinsic reading motivation (Morrow, 2004).

Literature presents a rich source of vocabulary. Beck and McKeown’s (2001) research showed that *explicit* vocabulary activities resulted in a significant increase in vocabulary. Dixon-Krauss (2002) and Kuhn and Stahl (1998) reviewed research that investigated the effect of literary text context on vocabulary development. They concluded that the vast majority of learned words did not come from direct instruction but were learned *incidentally*. Research in second language shows similar results (Wang and Guthrie, 2004; Holden, 2003).

## **Literature and Culture**

Literature offers a rich resource for not only language but also culture and our lives (Paran, 2006). Rich cultural information is embedded in literature (McNicholls, 2006). Children's literature is a powerful tool to teach children about their own culture, themselves, the world, and others (Hancock, 2000). Literature can enhance L2 learners’ critical thinking skills (Butler, 2006). Through literature, they can appreciate the similarities and tolerate the differences between their culture and other cultures. They can realize that “there is no one right way to think and feel, and no society can claim to have all of the right answers; we each gain perspective and

insight into our world by examining the perspective of other societies and cultures (Leahy and Lo, 1997, p. 222). Studying literature from another culture gives learners insight into the values and customs of other places. Literature is a powerful tool in teaching the relativity of cultural values and the inherent problems in cross-cultural communication (Strong, 1996, p. 303).

Thus, exposure to literature stimulates learners to reflect on concepts, recognize real life problems, explore causes and solutions, and compare their values and life styles with other cultures. This can provide teachers and learners, in the language classroom, with an authentic and rich context for discussion about their cultural values and traditions in contrast with other cultures. This, in turn, may encourage learners to avoid ethnocentrism and develop intercultural competence.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, an important reason for using literature in language teaching and learning is its sociolinguistic richness. Literature reflects the linguistic features of the social classes and the geographical areas of the culture. People speak differently in different situations, occasions, and places (i.e. formal, informal, dialects, colloquial, etc.). Thus, literature offers “genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers, and text-types at different levels of difficulty” (Duff and Maley, 2007, p. 6).

As for approaches to exploring culture, Banks (1989) proposes four instructional approaches: *decision-making and social action approach*, *transformation approach*, *additive approach*, and *contributions approach*. The *decision-making and social action approach* invites students to study important social issues and take action to solve problems by reading culturally conscious literature. The *transformation approach* modifies literature focus units to promote the study of historical events and contemporary issues from culturally diverse points of view. The *additive approach* connects multicultural literature to an existing literature focus unit. The *contributions approach* creates a cultural connection through literature with a special holiday or occasion.

## **Literary Genres**

The variety of literary genres (e.g. poetry, story, novel, drama, etc.) that literature offers is a good source of rich language exposure, especially in the ESL classroom (Heath, 1996). The present paper will focus on using stories/narrative texts in second language reading.

### **Drama**

Using drama, for example, can enhance and accelerate learners’ oral skills acquisition. Dramatic activities (e.g. role-play, improvisation, dramatization, miming) raise learners’ awareness of text structure, facilitate their comprehension, and increase their appreciation of literary texts.

### **Poetry**

Poetry plays a significant role in second language development. Hadaway, et al (2001, p. 799) identified the following benefits of using poetry in the second language classroom: (a) reading of poetry through reading aloud and choral reading promotes fluency; (b) the language of

poetry is manageable due to short lines and brevity, which makes it less intimidating; (c) rhythm, repetition, and rhyme in poetry help readers grasp the meaning with more ease; (d) poetry can serve as a powerful springboard for the introductions of concepts and content across the curriculum; (e) by providing a source of brief character sketches, scenes, and stories, poetry can serve as a prompt of narratives – oral and written; and (f) poetry offers a beginning for a variety of writing opportunities.

Elster (2000) also stated that poetry is a rich language resource, which promotes the exploration of sound, word association, and image, while extending the semantic resources available to learners. In addition to appreciating the aesthetic function of poetry, learners develop their critical thinking and imagination skills. Dramatizing poetry enhances learners' language proficiency and promotes their confidence in using English as a communicative tool (Elting and Firkins, 2006).

## **Story**

The story is a universal literary genre across all cultures of the world. Owing to this universality, it is a natural part of language learning experiences of people in every culture. It is “one of the most fundamental uses of language known to humans” (Butler, 2006, p. 19). Thus, stories can be a natural bridge between cultures. According to Ellis (2000), stories are a powerful educational tool. Hence, using stories in second language classrooms can provide rich, authentic and meaningful context for reading.

## **Reading Stories Aloud to Children**

Research indicates that literature can be used to enhance the four language skills. Several studies in L1 explicitly show the benefit of using stories in developing the listening and reading abilities of children through *reading stories aloud* to them. Reading aloud to children prepares them for learning to read and builds the foundation of literacy learning. It promotes their oral language ability that affects their reading skills, develops their knowledge background, exposes them to new word meanings, and promotes incidental learning (Meyer and Wardrop, 1994). Fisher and Medvic (2003) identified seven components of an effective story read-aloud:

1. Books appropriate to students' interests and that match students' developmental, emotional and social levels.
2. Previewing and practice of selection by the teacher.
3. The establishment of a clear purpose for the read-aloud.
4. Teacher modeling of fluent oral reading.
5. Use of animation and expression during the read-alouds.
6. Periodic and thoughtful questioning of students to focus on specifics of text.
7. Connections to independent reading and writing.

Besides, reading to children sparks their imagination and gives them ideas to write about in the future. It also develops processes that are vital to reading, i.e. knowledge building and critical thinking skills. In addition, it helps to enhance the emotional well-being of children and helps to

develop their self-confidence (Cheng, 2001). Rothlein and Meinbach (1991, p. 4) stated that “Reading aloud to children is a valuable activity that improves listening, verbal, and written skills and fosters a lifetime love of books and reading.” Cudd and Roberts (1993) pointed out that children who do not listen to or read books do not have exposure to the complex syntax found in written language and to the rich vocabulary that comprises literature. Lack of this meaningful exposure negatively affects children’s future writing ability because they lack sufficient concepts, vocabulary and language structures.

Huck (1992, p. 4) also mentions other benefits that children gain from listening to adults reading to them: (a) children learn that reading is pleasurable; (b) children learn about the structure of stories; (c) children learn the concept behind print; (d) children begin to build a frame of reference for literature; and (e) children learn new words and increase their vocabulary.

In second language classrooms, reading aloud by the teacher is more important for readers, especially at the early stage of learning the language. According to Amer (1997), when learners read to themselves, they tend to read word by word due to their limited linguistic competence. Guided by their anxiety to understand each word, they tend to break sentences into unmeaningful parts while they read. Hence, regular reading aloud by the teacher helps EFL readers discover units of meaning that should be read as phrases rather than word by word. It also helps readers to see reading as a continuous, meaningful process of building larger semantic units rather than focusing on graphic cues. With appropriate practice readers gradually realize that they can achieve a higher level of comprehension by reading larger meaningful units of texts rather than focusing on individual units. The proper production by the teacher of punctuation signals, stress, and intonation, plays an important role in this process.

## **Storytelling**

According to Roney (2009), storytelling is a process in which a person (the teller) uses narrative structure and mental imagery to communicate with the audience. Storytelling is a medium in which learners use *visualization and imagery skills* (Bell, 1991). It requires the ability to *picture* a person, a scene, a setting, and a situation as a *mental image*. According to Malo and Bullard (2000), through words, the listening learners create mental images, which are essential for understanding the story.

Strong and North (1996), on the other hand, define storytelling as a process in which learners practice categorizing, predicting, summarizing, organizing, comparing and contrasting information. Language learning takes place each time a story is told. In their opinion, storytelling requires critical thinking skills, e.g. being able to identify the parts of the story and how they relate to the whole, and being able to organize thoughts into a logical sequence.

## **Mental Imagery (Picturing or Visualization)**

It has been mentioned above that literature sparks learners’ imagination. This can be achieved through *picturing* or *mental imagery*. When readers construct mental images, they activate their prior knowledge and develop critical thinking skills. This constructive process

stimulates readers to construct relations between the parts of the text and the learners' knowledge and experiences (Gambrell and Jawitz, 1993).

According to Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003), visualizing enhances inferential thinking. When we visualize, we are inferring, but with mental images rather than words. When children are taught to form mental images while reading, they gain better recall and develop their abilities to make inferences and predictions. They also indicated that teacher-generated drawings enhance children's ability to visualize story content and structure. Gambrell and Jawitz (1993), on the other hand, indicated that illustrations to the text play a similar role to mental images.

## **Instructional Approaches to Teaching Stories**

There are two pedagogically effective approaches to teaching stories/narrative texts in English as a mother tongue: the "Story Grammar Approach" (SGA) and the "Reader Response Approach" (RRA). There has been currently an increasing interest in utilizing these two approaches in second language reading.

### **Story Grammar, Story Schema and Story Maps**

Research shows that learners who have a good understanding of narrative text structure have fewer problems comprehending this text type (Dymock and Nicholson, 1999). Research also suggests that many learners require explicit instruction in how to comprehend narrative text (Calfee and Patrick, 1995; Smolkin and Donovan, 2002). Narrative text structure is known as *story grammar*. A story grammar is the system of rules used for describing the internal structure of the story, i.e. the story parts, arrangements of the parts, and how the parts are related. A story may be composed of several *episodes*, each consisting of a *setting*, *characters*, a *problem*, *action*, and the *resolution*. A story schema, on the other, is the *mental representation* that readers have of story parts and their relationships.

One technique that uses story grammar components to enhance comprehension of narrative texts is story maps (Appendix 1). Story maps direct learners' attention to the story structure. They provide a visual or graphic display for key information in narrative texts. These maps prompt learners to identify story elements and provide space for them to record this information. Story maps may be used *before reading* a story to elicit prior knowledge and facilitate discussion. They may be used while reading the story to guide readers to record significant information. Moreover, they serve as a review after reading (Boulineau et al, 2004).

It is noteworthy that story maps can be generated using computer programs. Two programs written to produce maps are *Inspiration*, which is for middle school and older children, and *kidspiration*, which is for younger readers. Both programs work well in a small group or whole class setting when the visual display is presented through a large screen monitor or projected on a screen. Maps may be printed out for readers to work independently. Another feature of the two programs is that not only can the information be viewed as a map, but it can also be viewed as an outline. This feature helps readers make a connection between the graphic representation and its outline format (Amer, 2003, p. 67).

In general, explicit instruction in both story grammar and the use of story maps has resulted in positive effects on reading comprehension skills of elementary, secondary, and learners with and without learning disabilities (Gardill and Jitendra, 1999).

Story grammar research provides teachers with an excellent tool for teaching awareness of narrative text structure. Teachers may teach learners (Dymock, 2007):

1. That the **setting** establishes where and when the story takes place.
2. That **characters** can be classified as major and minor.
3. How to analyze individual characters, focusing on their appearance and personality, and how to compare and contrast characters.
4. How to analyze the **overall plot** and that it consists of four parts:
  - **Problem.** What is the problem in the story?
  - **Response.** How do characters respond to the problem?
  - **Action.** What do characters do about the problem?
  - **Outcome.** What is the outcome?
5. How to analyze individual **episodes** (i.e., subplot). Diagrams are used to enable the reader to visualize the episode analysis.
6. That the **theme** is the message that underlies the story. The theme often explains the motives of the characters or comments on social relationships or society in general. The theme is often left to the reader to interpret. Ask your pupils, “Why did the author write the story?”

Teachers also may use guiding questions based on the story grammar as stated by Cooper (1986, p. 382-384):

**Setting:** Where did the story happen?

When did the story happen?

**Characters:** Who was the story about?

Who were the people in the story?

Who was the most important person in the story?

**Problem:** Did the people have a problem?

What was the big problem that the story was about?

**Action:** What did the people do to solve the problem?

What were the important things that happened in the story?

**Resolution:** How did the people solve the problem?

How did the story end?



**Theme:** What lesson could we learn from the story?

### **Reader Response Approach**

In many language classrooms, the story is not being read as literature but as a piece of information (Carlisle 2000, p. 13). Hence, the teaching of literature is seen as an information-gathering exercise rather than an aesthetic experience in which the reader has a *response* to the event, which involves the free expression of his thoughts and feelings about the text (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 40). Benton and Fox (1990, pp. 2-18) identify four elements of *response* to text: *Anticipating/retrospecting*: guesses about what is going to happen next, what events lead to the current situation, and how the book is going to end; *picturing*: images that come into the mind's eye, such as a character's face or a scene described in the book; *interacting*: opinions on a character's personality and actions or feelings about events and situations; *evaluating* : comments on the skill of the writer.

According to Rosenblatt, (2005), literature must be experienced by learners. The Reader Response Approach encourages learners to *respond* to the text and express their own ideas, opinions and feelings freely. It views the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text, in which the reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, and values, interacts with the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this transaction (Ali, 1994, p. 290). In other words, readers question the author's values against their own values; they differentiate between fiction and reality; they are able to discuss and evaluate forms of narration and cultural values of the implied author (Thomson, 1987). Thus, reading is a reflective and creative process and meaning is self-constructed.

According to Gibson (2012, p. 12), "Beginning with the transactional relationships to the text, students are able to see themselves in relation to the characters and actions of the text. Through further reflection and opportunity to intelligently question, challenge and appreciate values and ideas within the text, students begin to form a position. This is further developed by application of critical perspectives, an element not inherent in Rosenblatt's theory but necessary for the transition from the process of reading to the process of thinking critically".

In the classroom, teachers should enable learners to realize that the main concern, while reading a story, is not "What they understand" but "how they feel." When the teacher asks learners to respond, he/she is asking them to go deeper, ask critical questions, argue with the author, and make connections to their own lives (Harvey and Goudvis (2000, p. 38). Hence, the teacher should accept "multiple interpretations" to a text rather than just one "correct interpretation" (Rosenblatt, 1995). From a pedagogic perspective, "multiple interpretations" allow for creative and critical thinking to take place in an atmosphere where there are no threats or any compulsion to learn for the "correct" answer or to compete for the "best" interpretation.

Before using the RRA in classrooms, teachers should first introduce the RRA. They should explain to students the main assumptions underlying the RRA outlined above. Teachers should discuss with their learners the difference between "reading literature" and "reading for information". Students should be consciously aware of their contribution to the text.

Several activities and techniques have been used to implement the RRA in language classrooms (cited in Amer, 2003): *Reading Logs* (Benton and Fox, 1985; Carlisle, 2000); *Response Journal* (Sheridan, 1991); *Writing Prompts* (Pritchard, 1993); *Critical Questioning and Writing* (Probst, 1994; Hirvela, 1996); *Self-questioning* (Davis, 1989); *Role-play, Drama and Letter-writing* (Elliot, 1990; Baxter, 1999); *Rewriting Narratives from Another Character's Point of View* (Oster, 1989); *The Developmental Model of Reader-Response Approach* (Thomson, 1987). It is not the purpose of this paper to present a detailed review of such activities and techniques. Only one activity is presented as an example (Thomson, 1987): *The Developmental Model of Reader-Response Approach* (Figure 1).

**Level 1: Literal understanding**

Students give summaries of the events of the story. Understanding of the story is at a very *superficial* level. Students are merely narrating the information in the text.

**Level 2: Empathy**

Students are involved in the story. They *identify* some aspects of the story with their own lives. They also have *imaginative sympathy* with one of the characters in the story, and this sympathy can range from reacting with the character to imagining how the character feels.

**Level 3: Analogy**

From the readings, students make connections between the characters and their lives, and from this, they learn about their own lives.

**Level 4: Interpretation**

Students reflect on the significance of events and behaviours in the text. Their reflections lead to generalizations and evaluations of the *characters* and *theme* of the story.

**Level 5: Evaluation of fiction**

Students view text as a *construct*. They question the author's values against their own values; they differentiate between *fiction* and *reality*; they are able to discuss and evaluate *forms of narration* and social and cultural values of the *implied author*.

**Level 6: Recognition**

Students make a conscious effort to consider their relationship with the text; they gain implications of constructedness (aspects of level 5) for their own *self-understanding*. They become more aware of their *reading process* and how they arrive at the meaning of a text. They are also able to evaluate their relationship with the *implied reader*.

Figure (1): Developmental model of a reader-response approach

It is noteworthy that the Story Grammar Approach and Reader Response Approach should be seen as complementing each other rather than in opposition to each other. The SGA may be used with beginners and intermediate learners since they may not possess the linguistic ability to express themselves freely. It may be also used with advanced learners as an introductory activity to Reader Response. Besides, SGA focuses on the cognitive aspect of learning whereas RR

focuses on the affective aspect of the learner, i.e. his feelings, emotions, free expression, and opinions.

### **Using Stories to Teach Language**

Although literature-based language instruction is primarily a meaning-oriented approach (Rosenkjar, 2006), formal grammar instruction may partially be integrated into the context of literary texts (Elley, 1997). As stated by Heath (1996, p. 776), literature has no rival in its power to create *natural repetition*. For example, the following short story provides a natural context for repeating the grammatical structures “*Can you break this bundle of sticks, son?*” and “*The ..... son tried but he couldn’t*” several times. The story may also be used to teach *regular* and *irregular* verbs. Learners’ attention may also be drawn to the *contracted form*, which is a feature of *conversational English*.

*Once upon a time, an old man lived happily with his sons in a small village. The man wanted to teach his sons the last lesson before his death. He brought a bundle of sticks and called his sons. “Can you break this bundle of sticks, son?”, the father said to his eldest son. The eldest son tried but he couldn’t. “Can you break this bundle of sticks, son?”, the father said to his second son. The second son tried but he couldn’t. “Can you break this bundle of sticks, son?”, the father said to his youngest son. The youngest son tried but he couldn’t. Then, the father untied the bundle. He gave each son one stick. “Now can you break the stick?”, the father said to his sons. Each son broke the stick. The father said to his sons: “Now, have you learned the lesson?”*

### **Conclusion**

Benefits of using literature in L1 and L2 reading have been reviewed. These benefits include promoting not only reading ability and motivation but also enhancing other language skills. Literature can also be used to teach grammar. In addition, integrating literary genres into L2 reading can create a learning environment that will provide comprehensible input and a low affective filter. The Story Grammar Approach and The Reader Response Approach are effective instructional approaches to teaching stories/narrative texts.

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Appendix (1): Story Map

The story map is enclosed in a large rectangular border. At the top, a triangle is formed by three ovals: 'Title' on the left, 'Setting' in the center, and 'Author' on the right. Below this, a row of three shapes contains 'Main Characters' (a hexagon), 'Student Name' (an oval), and 'Minor Characters' (a hexagon). The 'Student Name' oval also contains the word 'Class' below it. Below this row are two horizontal rounded rectangles: 'Problem' and 'Action'. At the bottom, there is a large oval labeled 'Resolution' on the left and a large octagon labeled 'Learnt Lesson' on the right.

**Title**

**Author**

**Setting**

**Main Characters**

**Student Name**

**Minor Characters**

**Class**

**Problem**

**Action**

**Resolution**

**Learnt Lesson**

