

Investigating the Effectiveness of an Integrated Approach to Teaching Literature in an EFL Context

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In the present paper, three models for teaching literature including language-based, literature as content or culture, and literature as personal growth or enrichment were evaluated. Based on these models, an integrated model was suggested. An experimental study was carried out in order to examine the effectiveness of the suggested approach compared to a conventional and instructor-led one. One-hundred and twenty BA students majoring in English Literature took part in a one-semester experiment. For the experimental group, the integrated approach was utilized whereas the method used for the control group was based on content-cultural model according to which the course instructor provided all the necessary information without focusing on the linguistic or stylistic considerations. The post-test consisted of three parts: linguistic, interpretive and cultural sections. The results of the study confirmed the plausibility of the use of the suggested eclectic approach to teaching literature. Several pedagogical implications were drawn.

Key Words: Literature, Teaching, Integrated Approach, EFL

1 Introduction

Literature is inherently complex and intricate which makes it inaccessible to the EFL learners who have a less than sophisticated knowledge of English language. This makes teaching literary texts in EFL contexts a demanding and controversial task. The challenges faced in teaching literature might have various reasons. First, the rhetorical use of language in poetry and prose often deviates from that of conventional, standard and non-literary language. As in the case of poetry, lexicon and syntax are manipulated to serve certain figurative features and to create specific effects. Linguistic limitations and lack of analytical skills of the EFL learners who may feel unequipped to overcome the difficulty of comprehending a text makes literature a difficult issue to deal with. Second, since in literary texts meaning is detached from the readers' immediate social context, readers need greater effort to interpret literary texts. Third, teaching literary texts requires general knowledge of literature, the forms it takes in a particular linguistic tradition, and an understanding of the relevant genres.

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Irrespective of the afore-mentioned difficulties, literature merits further attention as it widens learners' understanding of their own and other cultures and creates opportunities for personal expression as well as reinforces learners' linguistics knowledge. Conducting research on teaching literature can be informative in this regard and it "requires focus on the intersection of texts, contexts/students, and teacher as mediated by discourses and cultural models" (Beach, 2005, p. 26). This is indicative of the complexity of the factors, which have to be taken into consideration in any empirical investigations.

The present study gains significance as it can be considered as one of the few studies ever conducted on the approaches to teaching literature in EFL contexts. In contrast to many empirical investigations on learning a second or foreign language, "few empirical contributions on foreign-language literature *teaching* exist" (Bernhardt, 2001, p. 2). Marshall (2000, p. 396; cited in Bernhardt, 2001, p. 2) also noted that "we have had virtually no systematic studies of how literature teaching at the university proceeds". This reveals the necessity of carrying out further empirical studies to shed light on how literature can be dealt with best in EFL classroom and how maximum efficiency can be achieved.

In what follows, the phases of teaching literature and its methodology are explained. Then, an integrated model is suggested and its characteristics are briefly explained. Finally, an experimental study is reported that justifies the use of the suggested approach in EFL contexts.

2 Background

Teaching literature involves three phases: 1) 'the preliminary phase' which provides linguistic activities and aims at building comprehension; 2) 'the content-cultural phase' that provides students with certain aspects of target culture and literature and 3) 'the synthesis phase' that provides an overall evaluation of the text and includes expression and exchange of students' reactions to the literary text and their understanding as well. In this way, literature – as a potentially powerful tool – helps students develop both their linguistic and communicative skills as well as their knowledge of language across all discourse types. Focusing on linguistic competency, knowledge of language structure, functions and general communication should be given priority. For each literary work, an appropriate level of language proficiency (Carter & Long, 1991) as well as certain literary conventions is required. Then, EFL learners' attention has to be drawn to cultural elements as a key factor in preparing students to approach literary text with confidence. Based on the previous phases, the next step is to enable students to interpret the literary text and acquire a more thorough understanding as the text necessitates.

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3 Methodology of Teaching Literature

The purpose of teaching literature is to enable students to comprehend and analyze the linguistic structures, literary styles, figures of speech and rhetoric, develop their cultural understanding and expressive capabilities. To fulfill these objectives, an appropriate method should be utilized. In fact, the methodology of teaching literature can be viewed as a range of three models: language-based model, literature as content or cultural model, and literature as personal growth or enrichment model (Lazar, 1993; Carter & Long, 1991). Referring back to the afore-mentioned phases, the first phase highly focuses on the use of 'language-base model' whereas the second and the third ones are based on 'cultural model' and 'enrichment model' respectively.

'Language-based model' which is typically characterized by its intense and constant relationship with both linguistic form and literary meaning (Carter & Long, 1991) helps EFL learners enhance their knowledge of the target language by working on familiar grammar, lexical and discourse categories and indirectly paves the way for a better understanding of the text and meaningful interpretations. These will facilitate sensible and aesthetic appreciation of a text. Such an approach enables learners to access a text in a systematic and methodical way in order to exemplify specific linguistic features, e.g. literal and figurative language. Carter and McRae (1996) describe this model as taking a 'reductive approach' to literature. These activities are disconnected from the literary goals of a specific text in that they can be applied to any text. There is little engagement of the learner with the text other than purely linguistic practice; literature is used in a rather purposeless and mechanistic way in order to provide for a series of instructor-organized language activities.

While establishing the grammatical stand, the students should be taught elements of content which shed light on understanding a literary text. An issue worthy of attention is the use which can be made of content and culture together. Losing sight of the relationship of content to culture makes the text an isolated and de-contextualized set of facts in which they find their relevant meaning. The second phase can make best use of 'literature as content or cultural approach'. It helps EFL learners deal with a literary work in certain aspects of the target culture, such as literary history, genres, etc. It provides an opportunity for the learners to explore cultural background which leads to genuine understanding of literary works and encourages them to understand different cultures and ideologies in relation to their own. The third model, namely, 'literature as personal growth' or 'enrichment model' involves students' personal, intellectual and emotional experience. It relates the cultural model and the language model by focusing on the particular use of language in a text, as well as placing it in a specific cultural context. Learners are encouraged to express their feelings and opinions and make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those

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expressed in the text. Researchers who study the methodology of teaching literature also “need to consider variations in students’ level of engagement with different texts” (Beach, 2005, p. 10). Another aspect of this model is that it helps learners develop knowledge of ideas and language – content and formal schemata – through different themes and topics. This function relates to the theories of reading (Goodman, 1970) which emphasize the interaction of the reader with the text. As Cadorath and Harris (1998) pointed out, “text itself has no meaning, it only provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader's own experience” (p. 188). Thus, learning is said to take place when readers are able to interpret a given text and construct meaning on the basis of their own experience. This phase takes place after the first two phases and prepares language learners to appreciate a given literary work.

These three models of teaching literature differ in terms of their focus on the text. According to the first one, text is used as a focus for grammatical and structural analysis. The second one views text as a cultural artefact and the third one considers text as the stimulus for personal growth activities. What is needed is an approach to teaching literature in EFL contexts which is capable of integrating these elements in a systematic way so that literature becomes accessible to EFL learners and most beneficial for their linguistic development.

4 An Integrated Model for Teaching Literature

An integrated model is a linguistic approach which utilizes some of the strategies used in stylistic analysis, exploring texts, literary and non-literary from the perspective of style and its relationship to content and form. This involves the systematic and detailed analysis of the stylistic features of a text such as vocabulary, structure, register etc. in order to find out not just what a text means, but how it suggests what it means (Short, 1996). This suggested model (O’Brien, 1999) integrates linguistic description with interpretation of the text. However, for the benefit of EFL learners it is not as technical, rigorous or analytical as the stylistics approach. With the careful selection of the text, it can be adapted for all levels of language proficiency. How to teach based on the integrated model can be depicted in a number of phases as follow.

4.1 Linguistic considerations

Teaching literature usually begins when students have acquired a basic knowledge of the target language. However, EFL learners are in the process of language development when they start reading and experiencing literature. At this level, many students are not proficient enough to handle the texts without additional linguistic support. In fact, they are not native speakers

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who can blithely handle texts. Since students should be involved in both linguistic and cultural processes, they should be prepared for both concurrently. The duration of each stage, however, might vary depending on students' level of language background, personality types, and motivational factors. The first stand focuses on linguistic aspects of the text and is a prerequisite for the next step, namely, literary discussion.

4.2 Cultural considerations

Language and culture are inseparable, interdependent, and interactive in a way that they are intertwined (Damen, 1986; Kaplan, 1986). An important point that should be given priority, is that "the cultural barrier should be eliminated not only on the part of the educator and students but also among the students themselves" (Pollock, Chun & Kim, 2008). Stewart (1982) pointed out that every step of language learning involves the target-language culture. Language and culture are bound and "inextricably tied together" (Alptekin, 1993, p.139). Brown (1986) suggested that the success of second language learning depends largely on the synchronization of linguistic and cultural development and that too early linguistic mastery by a student may mean that such a student "may be less likely to achieve healthy acculturation and be unable to cope psychologically even though his linguistic skills are excellent" (p.42). As Pollock, Chun and Kim (2008) stated, due to cultural barriers, new challenges face educators on how effectively they can teach a course to EFL students with different values and beliefs.

4.3 Communicative Considerations

Literary texts can provide a basis for linguistic and stylistic analysis. The reader responds to the meaning of the texts via interactive participation in reading. Without analytical knowledge of the rules and conventions of linguistic communication, adequate interpretations seem to be a much difficult task. Literary texts have multiple layers of meanings and each meaning must be determined by a specific context. Apart from its stimulating functions, literature sets up conditions for a crucial part of language learning - the ability to infer meaning by procedural activity. Teaching literature can thus develop students' capabilities in the process of interpretation, and "in using literary texts educationally, it is easy to force the process of interpretation into our attention precisely because literary texts often resist easy interpretation" (Duran, 1993, pp. 160-161).

5 The Study

The major objective of the present study was to find out whether or not an integrated approach to literature functions more effectively than the

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conventional approach to teaching literature in an EFL context. Therefore, the following research question was addressed in the present study:

- Does the suggested integrated approach to teaching literature improve EFL learners' final achievement in 'Simple Prose Course'?

5.1 Participants

One-hundred and twenty BA students took part in the study in the spring semester of 2007. They were randomly assigned to two groups, namely, experimental and control groups. Each group consisted of sixty sophomore students majoring in English Literature. The mean age of the participants was found to be 21 years of age. They were taking 'Simple Prose Course' as the first literary course in the BA program. The level was considered as a control variable to neutralize any possible impact that it could have on the results of the study.

5.2 Instrument

The post-test given to the participants at the end of the experiment consisted of three parts: linguistic, interpretive and cultural sections (see Appendix A). Almost equal weight was given to these three sections and various types of items were selected from all the passages to be included in the test to meet content validity.

The first part of the post-test deals with knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in the form of paraphrasing a given text. The interpretive items require the participants to give their analysis of the literary text and the third part, i.e., cultural one is concerned with genres, cultural information, and literary techniques. The participants' test scores were reported out of twenty as indicated in Appendix A.

5.3 Procedures for data collection and data analysis

The 'Simple Prose Course' was the course under investigation in the present study. The passages covered throughout the experiment were as follow:

- *Disciplining Children*: John Holt
- *The Tables Turned*: Jan Needle
- *Shakespeare's Sister*: Virginia Woolf
- *The Lottery*: Shirley Jackson
- *Desiree's Baby*: Kate Chopin

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The experimental and control groups were taught based on two different teaching methods. The experimental group was taught based on the integrated approach as detailed below:

- a) *First Phase: Linguistic Considerations*
 - i. Students take the literary passage home to read with a recommended vocabulary list.
 - ii. Students study the list of vocabulary items, which might be unfamiliar to them and contain cultural meaning. (For example, a more detailed description of the word 'reservation' with its cultural connotation, political issues and system facilitates and extends the understanding of the context and enriches language use in appropriate situations).
 - iii. Students are encouraged to read aloud the story while they have already read it at home.
- b) *Second Phase: Cultural Considerations*

This phase was implemented in two ways:

 - 1. *Teacher-centered*: Teacher provided the necessary materials through lecture or by illustrating it in context.
 - 2. *Student-centered*: Students gave lectures on theoretical bases followed by the teacher's further explanations.
- c) *Third Phase: Communicative Consideration*

This section took place in the classroom in the form of classroom discussions among students with the help of the course instructor.

 - i. Before discussion, students read aloud part of the assigned reading to each member of their group.
 - ii. Students further discussed the selected topics and developed them into topics for the whole class to discuss.

For the control group, a common and conventional approach to teaching literature referred to as instructor-led approach to teaching. The method used for the control group was based on 'content-cultural model' according to which the course instructor provided all the necessary information without focusing on the linguistic or stylistic considerations. The instruction was of teacher-directed type in a way that class members were not given a much active role and were mostly mere recipients of information. As a result, class discussions had no place in this class. The experiment lasted for one academic semester. The post-tests were corrected by two university instructors to ensure inter-rater reliability. The Pearson coefficient of correlation was found to be + 0.84 that shows an almost high degree of agreement between the scorers.

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6 Results

A two-tailed hypothesis was assumed indicating that the experimental and control groups are not different and any observed differences would not be statistically significant.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the participants including the mean, standard deviation and standard error of means.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

GROUPS	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Std. Error of Mean
EXPERIMENTAL	60	17.0875	1.85994	.24012
CONTROL	60	14.5583	2.94165	.37977

The SPSS software was used to run an independent-samples t-test to check whether or not the differences between the experimental and control groups were statistically significant. Table 2 displays the results of independent-samples t-test:

Table 2. Results of Independent-Samples T-Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances						
	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
19.217	.000	5.629	118	.000	1.63941 (lower)	3.41892 (upper)

Observed T score was found to be much higher than the critical value of T when the level of significance was set at .05. The result of the t-test reveals that the difference observed between the control and experimental groups is statistically significant and not merely due to chance. In other words, the treatment offered to the experimental group was found to be effective. This is indicative of the superiority of the integrated approach introduced and suggested in this paper over the traditional instructor-led approach to teaching literature.

7 Conclusion

How to teach literature is a controversial question the answer to which is interrelated with a multitude of factors as the scope of literature necessitates. Utilizing an appropriate method in EFL classes assists students acquire the language more effectively, facilitates their socio-cultural competence and interpretative capabilities.

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The study reported in this paper confirms the plausibility of the use of an eclectic and multi-step approach to teaching literature, which posits three successive phases. This eclectic approach is in sharp contrast with the conventional approaches to teaching literature, which are mostly of instructor-led nature. As the results reveal, the suggested integrated approach seems to bring about much more positive results.

Significant pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings of the present study. Instructors are recommended to take these considerations into account and enhance EFL learners' appreciation of literature utilizing an integrated approach to teaching literature. The complexity and inaccessibility of literature is an obstacle which has to be wisely overcome. Another significant issue is the pleasure we gain from reading literature that should not be spoiled as it is a major objective in dealing with literature. Paying due attention to the process of instruction in literature classes opens up new avenues to the pedagogical objectives which were previously at least partially inaccessible.

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APPENDIX A (The Post-Test)

Student's Name
Time: 90 min.

Answer the following questions as requested.

PART A: (Linguistic Section)

Paraphrase the following statements:

1. The Pakistani lad had let go of the hosepipe.
2. They flashed across the croft bawling.
3. She scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly.
4. A sudden hush fell on the crowd.
5. He blushed at the ardor into which he had been betrayed.
6. They dwelt in solitude.
7. He yelled the top of his head off.
8. It was a rout.
9. He craned her neck to see through the crowd.
10. His face all twisted up.
11. None of the kids that liked to bash up the blackies ever touched him.
12. We can hardly ever wait to make someone pay for our humiliation.
13. He gathered round their hearth.
14. He exercised his wits in the streets.

PART B: (Interpretive Section)

1. Discuss the tone of *Shakespeare's Sister*.
2. Explain the kind of irony used in *Desiree's Baby*.
3. How are images manipulated to foreshadow ominous happening in *The Unexpected Guest*?
4. What does the title of *The Tables Turned* imply?
5. What is the climax of *The Lottery*?
6. Discuss the effect of setting in *The Unexpected Guest*.
7. How does the writer establish his theme and develop it in *Disciplining Children*?

PART C: (Cultural Section)

1. How is 'racism' involved in the plot of *Desiree's Baby*?
2. Why is not the exact setting mentioned in *The Lottery*?
3. "For my part I agree with the deceased bishop, is such he was – it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. Genius like Shakespeare's is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people." What does the writer want to convey in this paragraph?

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4. How do some aspects of traditional cultural lore in Jackson's *The Lottery* reveal imagination of evil and disaster?
5. Discuss the problem of discrimination, as it existed at the time of the author of *Shakespeare's Sister*. How is it reflected in the story?
6. Although *Desiree's baby* is set in America, why do all the characters have French names?

SCORING:

- * PART A: 7 * PART B: 7 * PART C: 6
- TOTAL SCORE: 20