

THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE IN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE – A CASE STUDY ON THE USE OF DRAMA AND ITS PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The ever-increasing need to communicate and be up to date with the language changing dimension and the continuous interactions worldwide impose learners and teachers of foreign languages to consider all proven and meaningful means of language acquisition in order to develop skills and competences.

Through the review of literature we can reiterate and properly estimate the traditional role of literary texts in our teaching process but it is through our practical considerations and efforts within the classroom setting, through detailed and conspicuous patterns of literature that we can feel its immense power and results on our students.

This paper aims at highlighting the impact of drama in our students's learning process, how it fosters autonomy, eagerness, motivation and creativity. These will be reinforced in a case study organized with the English Study Skills class in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, Albania.

Keywords: Drama, Second Language Teaching, Second Language Learners, pedagogical advantages, competences

1. Introduction

There are many definitions of literature and the simplest suggests that anything written is literature, however, no clear and accurate meaning can be rendered since it extends at large and covers almost all life aspects.

The Collins Dictionary defines literature as “written material such as poetry, novels, essays, etc, especially works of imagination characterized by excellence of style and expression and by themes of general or enduring interest”.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines it:

1 *archaic* : literary culture

2 : the production of literary work especially as an occupation

3 a (1) : writings in prose or verse; *especially* : writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest(2) : an example of such writings <what came out, though rarely *literature*, was always a roaring good story — *People*>

b : the body of written works produced in a particular language, country, or age

c : the body of writings on a particular subject <scientific *literature*>

d : printed matter (as leaflets or circulars) <campaign *literature*>

4: the aggregate of a usually specified type of musical compositions

Generally speaking the term is used to describe anything from creative writing to technical or scientific works, but the term refers primarily to creative imagination including short stories, novels, poetry and drama.

The setting of SLT process shows that the teaching goals have determined the teaching and learning methods and tools. From the start, the primary source of obtaining teaching materials derived from literature. In the 60s' and 70s' the key reason of studying a foreign language was to study the target language literature. However, under the structuralist approach the emphasis shifted to linguistics and the language used to communicate (Brumfit, 1981). The use of literature for linguistic purposes lost its importance in the communicative approach based on the rationale that the language and literature are learned separately and for diverse purposes (Liddicoat, 2000). Literary texts were used for communication purposes only and the syllabi relied on texts developing the everyday communication.

Although in the beginnings of the communicative approach of teaching, the authentic literary texts were considered as a means to equip learners with the representative usages of the language, many literary texts concentrated on the linguistic peculiarities and functions and scarcely used the originality of literature during the teaching-learning process.

However, the needs for using a language have changed in the 21st century. The language users are required to communicate properly and effectively with other speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Intercultural skills are required and they cannot be acquired through communication materials solely. Learners need to acquire not only grammar and lexis but also the intercultural communicative skills. They must be enabled to think critically and use proper language in determined situations to achieve communication.

Recently, studying literature for cultural purposes has drawn the attention of many foreign language teachers. There are specific dedicated subjects such as British and/or American studies relating to studying the literature to understand a country's history and culture. Many annotated

scholars recommend integrating literary texts in the SLT programs (Lazar, 1993) or developing a program with incorporated literary extracts (Kramersch, 1993).

Wellek and Warren (Wellek, R. & Warren, 1963) highlight the differences between the literary language and the colloquial language: "... it is clear that the literary language differs from the other uses of colloquial language. The language means are presented systematically and discreetly using the paradox, ambiguity and the contextual connotations..."

Chomsky says that when we study the human language we approach the so called "the human gist", the conspicuous qualities of the mind characteristic of human beings (Chomsky, 1968).

2. Advantages of literature for students

Literary texts serve to develop the linguistic and literary skills. It is important that any SL student build up the four competences: reading, listening, speaking and writing. In their native language, people are unaware of having acquired these competences since it is a complex innate process.

Firstly, the reading competence helps build and extend the vocabulary and improve understanding during listening and writing.

Secondly, the reading competence includes some subskills such as

- a. comprehending the lexis,
- b. determining the key words,
- c. speculating the meaning of unknown words from the context,
- d. identifying the grammatical categories of nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc
- e. understanding the denotations and connotations of the material
- f. using generic knowledge and the lexical and grammatical cohesive means to link the topic and the focus
- g. identifying the key message and the gist

If literature were used as a source material while studying a foreign language, students must be equipped with the necessary information to understand and analyze its key principles. They ought to learn to recognize its peculiar indications in a literary text and find a meaning from the diverse use of language. The first skill is known as "communicative consciousness" and the second as "linguistic consciousness" and they both rely on the comparative and contrastive principles. Therefore, it is fundamental that students enjoy the communicative skills and competence to comprehend and interpret the literary masterpieces and this ability is known as the literary competence.

3. Pedagogical advantages of literature in the SLT process

Lazar (Lazar,1993) claims that SL acquisition may get a move on by focusing students on tasks that allow them to work autonomously, encourage them to express their opinions because, according to the author, literature motivates, fosters acquisition, cultivates linguistic consciousness, develops interpretation skills and educates the students.

Amid a myriad of reasons and causes elaborated by eminent scholars, attention is paid to the advantages of integrating literature in the foreign language classrooms founded on the grounds that:

1. Literature provides students with concrete patterns and it represents the language at its best and thus provides an ideal model for language learning.
2. Literature helps students develop their language awareness and knowledge about language
3. Themes and fables of literary materials promote meaningful debates, discussions that develop the linguistic and communicative competences.
4. Literature provides an authentic source to teach grammar and vocabulary.
5. Literature fosters motivation in SLL because it develops the reader's imagination and emotions.
6. Literature provides students with knowledge about the cultural values and norms embodied in the language.
7. The study of literature affects the student's knowledge and worldview.
8. Implementation of several techniques and learning activities such as exercises such as gap filling, with some potential answers and reading in the study of literature give students opportunities to develop their language skills and increase interaction with texts.
9. Comparison of the literary with the non-literary texts allows students to shift from the known to the unknown; literature thus becomes accessible.
10. The combination of the study of literary texts with creative language activities (such as rewriting the story end, participating in role plays, rewriting a story from a different perspective) makes the literary text more accessible.
11. Students can not develop their literary competence unless the linguistic competence develops. Integration of linguistics and literature fosters language competence among the students.

4. A case study to identify the potential of drama in developing three competences

To examine the potential of literature in second language learning, here are presented the stages of a simulation exercise through one literary genre, the drama, during English Study Skills module with English students of the first course – an upper intermediate level, English Branch, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, Albania. During this exercise students were required to listen to, read and rehearse extracts from a play *True West* by Sam Shepard. The play was to be processed in small groups, ideas to be identified and at the end of the classes students were assigned the task of making a presentation on the main themes identified in the play and their social impact in the American society.

4.1. Aim

The aim of this case study is to examine the nature of the impact of literature, drama in particular, in the progress of Second Language Teaching in class during a curricular project.

This paper is focused on these research questions:

a) What is the impact of literature/drama on students' motivation, autonomy, and class collaboration?

b) What are students' attitudes regarding the integration of drama in Second Language Teaching and their opinion on the relative weight of the advantages and disadvantages that attend the use of this technique?

4.2. Methodology:

The focus of this paper is to improve the three skills: listening, reading and speaking through drama during English Study Skills module with English students of the first course – an upper intermediate level, a sample of 14 students of the English Branch, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, Albania, in April, 2014.

The method pursued is that of a descriptive analysis of the project structure and stages (6 academic classes) as well as the examination of the data obtained through a students' questionnaire, which identifies the advantages and disadvantages of this format. The target students worked in three groups of 4 or 5 participants (Group A, Group B, Group C).

4.3. Analytical description of the case study

Topic: True West (a play by Sam Shepard)

Students: English, First course (upper-intermediate level)

Module: English Study Skills

Objectives:

1. To bring Sam Shepard close to students, learn about his works and enjoy rehearsing

2. To improve English communicative skills (listening skills - the play on Youtube, reading skills - the handouts with the play extracts, speaking skills – make a presentation)
3. To enrich students' vocabulary fund with lexical items
4. To develop inter-curricular connections (for e.g. with geography: identify the American locations, with sociology: comprehend the American post-modern society and consumerism)
5. To spur students' critical and creative thinking through team work by sharing responsibilities, roles, rehearsing.

Case study stages

Class 1 – 2:

1. Students are introduced to the playwright. Sam Shepard, the winner of the Cannes Palme D'Or, OBIE award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The early plays focus on the America of the '60s, the family plays on the American changes of the '70s – '90s and the recent plays encompass the themes of national identity and the individual of our times. His themes focus on creating the image of human identity in general and of the male identity in particular in the face of the modern consuming society, which is willing to dump everything outdated, not only materialistic, but traditional and non-conformist to modernity, such as the family.
2. Students are introduced to the play: TRUE WEST is a character study that examines the relationship between Austin, a screenwriter, and his older brother Lee. It is set in the kitchen of their mother's home 40 miles east of Los Angeles. Austin is house-sitting while their mother is in Alaska, and there he is confronted by his brother, who proceeds to bully his way into staying at the house and using Austin's car. In addition, the screenplay which Austin is pitching to his connection in Hollywood somehow gets taken over by the pushy con-man tactics of Lee, and the brothers find themselves forced to cooperate in the creation of a story that will make or break both their lives. In the process, the conflict between the brothers creates a heated situation in which their roles as successful family man and nomadic drifter are somehow reversed, and each man finds himself admitting that he had somehow always wished he were in the other's shoes. (Description obtained from Sam Shepard's webpage).
3. Students watch the play on Youtube and are assigned to read it at home.

Class 3-4

Students are divided in 3 groups of 4-5. Each group focuses on one act. They elaborate on the key words in their section and the themes arising, developing or being solved therein.

The themes:

The Curse of Ancestry

The Old West vs. the New West

Art as a Business vs. Art as an Ideal

The Failure of the American Dream

The symbols:

The desert, drinking, the old man, the two main characters, houseplants.

The idiolect of both key characters (Austin and Lee) depicting their background and what part of society each stands for.

The concept of switching roles leading intuitively to the idea that both brothers are representatives of 2 halves of one whole; they represent the changing American society, the alienated family.

The names of the key characters are written on the board and the groups come up with a list of features for each.

The monolog and dialog: After discussing the subject, the students refer to the major events in the play in their separate groups: 1. The discussion of the screenplay, 2. The conflict between both brothers, 3. The reversed roles.

A list with the same statements is handed to each group and they need to identify the character who said it. The aim is not only to make students recall the play, but also to link the character's idiolect/discourse/slang/swearing/sophistication to his background. This mini-contest between the small groups urges students to work seriously.

Each group is asked to provide a different ending to the play.

Each group is assigned to interepret that unique ending and rehearse inside the classroom, and prepare a group presentation which topic was assigned by me on one of the themes: The Old West vs. the New West, Art as a Business vs. Art as an Ideal, The Failure of the American Dream (I left out the Curse of the Ancistry since the students elaborated mostly on these themes and found them more tangible in the American context).

Class 5-6

1. Students make the final rehearsal in class within the small group and interpret their original ending.

2. Students make the presentation focusing on the sociological aspects promoted by the play.
3. Students fill in a questionnaire with their impressions.

4.4 Analysis of the questionnaire over the drama technique in the language classroom

To analyze the extent to which this case study has resulted beneficial, a survey was carried out with the 14 target students. They were asked to fill in a questionnaire expressing their attitudes concerning the advantages, disadvantages of this format and some future recommendations.

According to the students asked the drama technique proved a successful initiative.

Regarding our research question, we have obtained the following results:

According to students' opinions, the integration of drama in English teaching has contributed a great deal to an overall increase in students' motivation, learner autonomy indicators, task participation and collaboration. More concretely, 82% of the students enjoyed the opportunity of being actively included and collaborating in groups.

100% of them appreciate the fact that they felt free to organize, manage and take responsibility over the whole process.

90% esteemed the fact of drafting their own endings as they felt somehow "playwrights".

85% liked the fact of being a protagonist in the presentation and speak about concerning issues, especially aspects of the American society that they also cover in another subject: American studies.

On the other hand, students highlighted a few setbacks and challenges they faced on the way.

Listening and comprehending a play within 1h 30 min was tough.

Further serious commitment was needed at home, outside the classroom setting.

25% marked the linguistic difficulty in understanding the spoken (not read) version.

Conclusion

Drama helped the students develop their critical and independent thinking because it developed their imagination. It helped students to express their opinions and give their contribution. Through its dialogue, it provided endless possibilities of interactions, communication aspects and language usage. Simulation/ "rehearsal" served as the most efficient means of tracing the world described. Drama had the ability to make students feel proud of their work.

Drama integrated the language skills naturally, the verbal skills and non-verbal communication by placing a balance between the physical and the intellectual aspect.

The language used in different situations promoted interaction, awareness, self-esteem and confidence. It stimulated imagination and creativity, affected the dynamics and atmosphere of the classroom and proved to be a nice experience.

One other essential aspect was the social perspective. The importance of this social dimension should not be overlooked. The process of learning takes place best among a supportive and collaborative community. Students worked in teams and in challenging environments. Students consulted each other, negotiated, agreed, took on responsibility and cooperated in order to achieve something significant to present. In this way they became active participants not only in the cognitive but also the social and aesthetic process. They reflected their perceptions both inside and outside the context.

Through my direct observation I noticed increased motivation, participation of all students, autonomy, delightfulness and eagerness to engage in the play.

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