

The Significance of the Linguistic Approach to Literature: Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract:

Along with other resources, literature is nowadays viewed as one of the authentic resources in teaching foreign languages. It has been demonstrated that using literature in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms follows a variety of approaches. Since literature appeals to many learners' personalities and it is an obligatory module at the Algerian tertiary level in departments majoring in English language, this paper seeks to clarify the importance of linguistically analyzing literary works. In addition, it aims at suggesting implications for using this approach to literature in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) for the purpose of enhancing learning.

Keywords: Language instruction, linguistic approach, literature, TEFL

It's not that the speaker is trying to be poetic, it's just that that's the way language works.

(Steven Pinker)

Introduction

Literature is employed in EFL classes to bring positive results. It seems that literature serves better in the acquisition of language, especially in intermediate and upper classes of English. However, it could be, in some ways, employed at lower levels (Chen & Squires, 2011; McRae & Boardman, 1984). Even with beginners, graded readers bear a significant influence on learning the language (Zaro Vera, 1991). For instance, a group of beginners who are asked to act a simple play will inevitably internalize vocabulary and memorize grammar patterns.

Nowadays, the importance of integrating literature in language classrooms is no more questionable. This is supported by strong scholarly justifications of incorporating literature in language classrooms over the past decades (Brumfit, 1985; Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Carter, Goddard, Reah, Sanger, & Bowring, 2001; Carter & McRae, 1996; Collie & Slater, 1990; Lazar, 1993; Maley, 1989; Sage, 1987; Short, 1996). All these scholars concluded that literature helps to enhance learner's overall knowledge of the language. Against this backdrop, the present paper takes their claim one step further to clarify the significance of one approach to literature, namely the linguistic analysis of literary works. It suggests that the linguistic analysis enhances EFL learners in Algerian universities as well as it develops their ability to appreciate and interpret texts on multiple levels of meaning: implicatures, presuppositions, conversational markers, to mention but few.

1. Literature and its Language

Various definitions of literature have been suggested by different scholars. Pound (as cited in Lazar 1993) sees great literature in the "language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (p. 2). This means that it is through linguistic analysis that readers of a given literary text come to interpret the multiple levels of meaning "charged" in the text. Some scholars like

Barthes 1978 (as cited in Lazar, *ibid.*) state that literary texts have no definitive interpretation: "literature is the question minus the answer." It is unrealistic to claim that literature is objective and factual. On the contrary, literature is subjective; this is why it arouses emotions and appeals to different people of different personalities. Defining literature is no easy task since there is no universal definition of it; yet, it is agreed that literature means novels, plays, poems and other fictional works that are characterized by rich language which can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Literature uses language that deviates from the ordinary language and other forms of discourse. It breaks language rules in all literary genres, especially poetry (Widdowson, 1984). That is why literature is suited in intermediate and not beginner classes: the reason is not to confuse literary language with the ordinary one. However, if one was given extracts and asked to distinguish the literary extracts from the non-literary ones, one would find it a difficult task because reality caters the literary world (Lazar, 1993). Literature, of course, can be imagined and fictional, but its stones are representations of real-world experience. Therefore, the validity of the claim that literary language is isolated from ordinary language is questioned.

Many linguists argue that literary language is isolated from the ordinary one due to the reoccurrence of some features. In spite of the occurrence of these features in real life language, they do not occur as much as they do in literary texts (Brumfit & Carter, 1986). For instance, metaphors, similes, assonance, alliteration, ambiguous words and mixing of styles are characteristics that are more frequently used in literary texts and rarely found in real life use of language.

2. Literature in language classrooms

It is incumbent upon teachers to make a distinction between two primary purposes of using literature in classrooms based on the end of its use. Teaching literature for the sake of its nature is a goal that differs from using it as a resource for teaching language (Maley, 1989). Therefore, the study of

literature differs from the use of literature as a resource for teaching English. “Literary competence” is significantly crucial in the former because literature is the sole content of the course; literature by itself is the end of the course (Culler, 2002). In the use of literature as a resource for English teaching, literary competence is trivial because literature is a means to an end. That is to say, literature is one among other different resources of developing learners’ language. This, of course, does not mean that teachers should neglect the development of learners’ literary competence. Although literature is only occasionally used, teachers are required to implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) develop the literary competence of learners through the exposure to literary texts. Whatever is the purpose of using literature, whether as content or as a resource for teaching English, effective readers of literary texts possess literary competence. The present paper is not concerned with literary competence and its constituents, but with literature as a means to teach language. In this regard, there is no harm to mention the approaches to literature in classrooms with a focus on the linguistic-based approach for it is the proposed argument.

3. Approaches to using literature

According to Lazar (1993), there are three main approaches to literature: literature as content, literature for personal enrichment, and the language-based approach.

3.1. Literature as content

This approach was traced back to be the most traditional one. The literature itself is the content of the course. Usually, these courses are organized historically or according to literary genres. Surely, this approach is successful with learners who have a genuine interest in literature. It also proved to have some elements that can be useful in language classrooms. Providing information about literary texts is of vital importance where text information entails many notions as follows:

- Author (the notion of author biography, style of writing, and living time)
- Ideas carried in the text (political ideas, philosophical, religious, etc.)
- Reference points of the text (places, objects, etc.)
- Genre of the text (short stories, novels, poems, etc.)

“Literature as content” is similar to the “Cultural Model” suggested by Carter and Long (1991). The cultural model focuses on language as a cultural artefact that must be investigated through social, political, literary and historical perspectives. According to this approach, information about the author and his or her life in the historical continuum will aid when interpreting literary texts. However, such information would bore a range of learners who are not, say, literary-minded.

3.2. Literature for personal enrichment

It is famously known for its emphasis on personal experiences of the reader (in our case the EFL learner). Experiences entail both feelings and opinions. The approach clearly encourages the intellectual and emotional interaction between the reader and the text. Teachers are required to select from the vast literary works the ones that encourage personal response. To do this, teachers may rely on their intuition of what appeals to learners based on learners’ age, lifestyle, social position, etc. How useful this way may seem, it is better to accompany it with a questionnaire or provide a list of topics that learners may choose from in order to decide what appeals to them. Having done all this, what if students are unwilling to give their responses to the text at hand?

Pedagogically speaking, in every class there are some learners who are unwilling to respond due to some factors, such as unfamiliarity with this kind of education, cultural differences, personality differences, sensitivity to

some raised issues by the literary work and so forth. Whatever the reason is, some techniques proved to be helpful: using group activities, pair activities and leaving students the choice to choose their peers. Another way to encourage students to respond to a given text is to ask them about their experiences before reading the text through the employment of cueing or brainstorming techniques.

Again, Lazar's "literature for personal enrichment" is similar to Carter's and Long's the "Personal Growth Model" which aims at placing emphasis on the learners' own response to the literary texts including learners' interaction, feelings, ideas and opinions. Therefore, a teacher of literature must not be a dominant know-all figure who provides his or her interpretations of the text to his or her students, but the teacher must encourage students to develop their own interpretations of a given literary text.

3.3. Language-based approach

As its name suggests, it is clear that studying literary texts is through linguistic analysis. By focusing on the language of the literary text at hand, students will improve their English, especially in terms of grammar, vocabulary and the discoursal aesthetic judgments of the text. Texts are selected to serve the teaching of some language elements. The approach was criticized as being mechanical and demotivating. Some critics argue that this approach is not pleasurable for there is no pleasure in analyzing texts linguistically. They argue that pleasure lies in the interpretation of the text and the interaction of the reader with the text (Lazar, 1993). This paper does not align itself with such a claim. Linguistic analysis to literary texts is in itself an interaction between the reader and the text. As per being mechanical, the language-based approach can at least be considered as an objective interpretation to literature. In addition, if pleasure is the main determinant of approaching literature, this paper argues that there are different learners' and readers' personalities among which those who like to linguistically analyze. The question is whether they should be neglected.

Proponents of the language-based approach consider literature as a resource for stimulating language activities. Hence, it is similar to “the Language Model” suggested by Carter and Long (1991) which is based on the idea that literature has a rich repertoire of linguistic features that can be practiced in classrooms.

The three approaches are not separated from each other. They may relate to each other depending on the different situations of teaching literature. Teachers usually use a combination of approaches or select according to what they want to achieve. However, because literature is rarely used in EFL classes for its own sake but used for language teaching purposes, the paper argues that the linguistic approach should be the driving approach in EFL classes.

4. Linguistic analysis

Linguistic analysis is an objective method of interpretation since it only emphasizes the linguistic features of texts. Togeby (2014) divided texts into practical texts, factual prose and literary texts. The latter are characterized by being artistic; in this vein, literature is viewed as art put into text. The purpose of literary texts is to entertain and amuse the readers of its different genres: novels, short stories, plays, and poems. However, these texts are somewhat harder to comprehend because, according to Alderson (2000), they defamiliarize language to create special effects. Therefore, the role of linguistic analysis is to demystify literary texts.

Linguistic analysis to literary text is not only sentence based, but a discourse based as well. A closer examination of literary texts involves regularity, deviance, polysemy, and other features of discourse (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000). The use of linguistic concepts, such as “coherence”, “cohesion”, “transitivity”, “under-lexicalization” and “collocation” is frequent and referred to as foregrounding devices in literature. Foregrounding is used as a technique to highlight the meaning of something in literature like using a set of expressions to explain one word (e.g. “the holding thing” instead of

using “handle”, i.e., under-lexicalization). Linguistic analysis can be cardinal even in the process of writing literature. Some writers use a “linguistic deviation” as a device to create the desired effect on readers. For instance, in order for a writer to project the illiteracy of one character, the writer would misspell the speech of that character whenever the character appears through the novel.

5. Practical implications

The main argument of this paper is that linguistic analysis of literature can enhance learner’s ability to understand texts as well as it improves learner's English. Take any literary texts and try to analyze it linguistically in terms of Grice implicatures. It is difficult, especially for beginners; yet, it is helpful to understand the conveyed messages and it develops learners’ competency. Some argue that implicatures are more literary than linguistic. Correct as it may seem, implicatures can be mentioned in literary metalanguage as personification, metaphors, and so forth. Another example of linguistic analysis that would be more suitable at lower levels is analyzing a poem phonologically where learners can guess the pronunciation of unknown words based on previous rhymes as well as analyzing the poem syntactically where the same patterns of sentence reoccur in the lines of the poem. Generally, poetry is an excellent medium to learn foreign languages “because, within the conciseness of a poem, language is utilized in the most creative manner possible” (Xerri & Agius, 2012, p. 21).

Teachers should be careful when selecting literary texts. Many literary works deviate from the rules. Thus, exposing learners to these literary works will confuse them. However, exposing learners at a later stage to these works is necessary because they enable learners to think at multiple levels of meanings. Teachers should gradually move to more complex literary text to help learners notice the sense of different forms and different levels of meaning.

In order for teachers to take advantages of linguistic analysis, according to Lazar (1993), they have to follow two steps: teachers should notice, first, the recurring linguistic features of the text; second, they should develop questions about them. For instance, when expressing the point of view of a given literary work, a writer can use the expression “Adam hit Mary” where the narrator has an objective view towards the action of hitting. What if the writer has written “Adam hit his wife” or “Mary's husband hit her”? Are they the same? Are they as objective as “Adam hit Mary”? Which side or perspective the narrator tends to emphasize by which sentence? The reason for developing these questions is to bring learners’ attention to the reoccurring features with an emphasis on whatever may deviate from the normal use of these features.

Another example is when employing the passive or active voice to manifest the empathy of the narrator. It is said that the passive sentence “Mary was hit by her husband” carries the empathy of the narrator towards Mary. Therefore, it is crucial to notice and bring learners’ attention to the notion that linguistic forms of such sentences determine the differing interpretations (Ehrlich, 2014). In other words, the linguistic analysis to “literature demonstrates for learners the importance of form in achieving specific communicative goals” (McKay, 2001, p. 319).

Literature is a reading-centered activity. Reading is twofold: intensive and extensive. Intensive reading is what teachers use in classes; it is a closed study of shorter texts or extracts from novels or any other genres. On the other hand, extensive reading, according to Susser and Robb (1990), is reading long texts for pleasure and for general understanding. It is extensive reading that leads to language acquisition, argued Krashen (1982) and Grabe (1991). However, this is not practical in classrooms. It has been noticed that some teachers expect an extensive reading of literature from the side of their students. To be realistic, most students do not read outside the classroom. Therefore, teachers should not build on this expectation, but they

have to rely on intensive reading inside the class where linguistic analysis seems to achieve the purpose.

According to Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (2005), Formalists treat literature as a special language because it deviates and distorts the language of communication. In this regard, a classroom implication for teachers would be to pinpoint how the provided literary texts deviate from the ordinary language. Its applicability is vital in classroom settings, especially in intensive reading but always with teacher assistance (Lazar, 1993). Even if learners read literature extensively by themselves outside the class, they may confuse the ordinary language with the literary one. It is only when EFL learners are provided with techniques of linguistic analysis and training in intensive reading of literature that they can move to extensive reading by themselves.

The final implication to linguistic analysis, in this paper, is an activity provided by McKay (2001) who gave illustrations by employing two short stories in classroom settings. After reading the short stories, the teacher may require students to elicit words, sentences, or even paragraphs that had an influence on interpreting the text by completing a character chart¹ as follows.

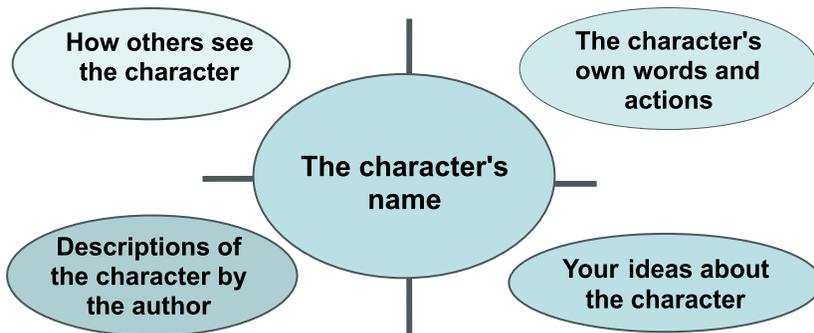


Figure 1. The character chart

¹ McKay contributed the original chart to McKloskey and Stack (1993).

After completing the chart, students are required to analyze the language of (and compare between) the two short stories. The main objective of such an activity is to develop learners' language competency. Activities about tenses, language of narrating, sentence structure and other linguistic activities exist not only in Makay (2001) but also in a range of different books, textbooks, worksheets that are published to inform teachers about how to propel learners' language proficiency (Collie & Slater, 1990; Duff & Maley, 2007; Vaughan-Rees, 2010).

Conclusion

By focusing this paper on linguistic analysis does not mean that literary criticism or other approaches are inferior, neither the converse is true. Other approaches and linguistic analysis of literary texts should go hand-in-hand. However, for the purpose of improving learners' language, the paper argues that linguistic analysis of literature could be seen as a strategy that boosts the ability to interpret texts. It could be seen as a strategy that enhances the language competency of learners and helps a great deal in acquiring the target language. Although it tends to be mechanical and reduces learners' emotional response to literary texts, linguistic analysis, on the whole, is a useful way of increasing learners' knowledge of the foreign language.

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