

Enhance Student Learning Motivation Through Literature in English Teaching

LI Yu^{[a],*}; FAN Zhenghui^[b]

^[a]Open College in Zhejiang Taizhou Radio and TV University, Zhejiang, China.

^[b]Community College in Zhejiang Taizhou Radio and TV University, Zhejiang, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This paper proposes that literature should be used as a means to improve students' motivation in learning English instead of as an end for literature appreciation class only. The benefits of using literature in English teaching are discussed and some strategies of using literature in classroom teaching are presented. The requirements of teachers in utilizing literature in class are also expounded.

Key words: Literature; Motivation; English teaching

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Thanks to the opening up to the outside world and the improvement of living standards in China, more and more people have the chance to work, study or travel abroad. Since English is the most spoken international language, the mastery of English is a necessity for anyone who wants to go abroad or engage in work involving contact with people from other countries. But the current English teaching status quo is far from satisfactory. People who

were born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s grew up with the dominant grammar-translation teaching method, and in most cases are poor in listening and speaking, therefore sometimes dubbed "deaf and dumb" English learners. Owing to the easy access to authentic listening materials through various channels, such as the Internet, original movies and other authentic materials, people who were born in 1990s and later are better off in listening and speaking. However, the examination-oriented teaching method is still dominant in both secondary and tertiary education here in China. As a result, students seldom have the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the English language and the cultural heritage behind the language. Since literature appeals to most people, teaching English through literature is a worthwhile try to increase students' interest and motivation in learning English in an enjoyable way.

1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In recent years, the role of literature has shifted from the aim of language instruction to a basic component and authentic source of language instruction. Many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern (Sage, 1987, p.1). Collie and Slater (1990, p.3) summarizes four reasons which lead to a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Literature is authentic material. Most works of literature are not created for the primary purpose of teaching a language. Because students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers, they become familiar with many different linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings. The best way to learn a language is to live in a country where the target language is spoken. However, this is just impossible for many language learners. For these learners, literary works can help them

to understand how communication takes place in that country. Though the world of literature is an imaginary one, it describes characters from many social backgrounds in a full and colorful setting. A reader can discover the way the characters in such literary works see the world outside. Literature provides learners with a wide range of individual lexical or syntactic items. Students become familiar with many features of the written language, reading a substantial and contextualized body of text. They learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their own writing skills. Students also become more productive and adventurous when they begin to perceive the richness and diversity of the language they are trying to learn and begin to make use of some of that potential themselves. Thus, they improve their communicative and cultural competence in the authentic richness, naturalness of the authentic texts. Literature can be useful in the language learning process owing to the personal involvement it fosters in the reader. Once the student reads a literary text, he begins to inhabit the text. He is drawn into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. Maley (1989, p.12) lists some of the reasons for regarding literature as a potent resource in the language classroom. Universality: because we are all human beings, the themes literature deals with are common to all cultures despite their different way of treatment-Death, Love, Separation, Belief, Nature...the list is familiar. These experiences all happen to human beings; Non-triviality: many of the more familiar forms of language teaching inputs tend to trivialize texts or experience. Literature does not trivialize or talk down. It is about things which mattered to the author when he wrote them. It may offer genuine as well as merely "authentic" inputs; Personal relevance: since it deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which either constitute part of the reader's experience or which they can enter into imaginatively, they are able to relate it to their own lives; Variety: literature includes within it all possible varieties of subject matter. Within literature, we can find the language of law and of mountaineering, of medicine and of bull-fighting, of church sermons and nursery talk; Interest: literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting and treats them in ways designed to engage the readers' attention. Economy and suggestive power: one of the great strengths of literature is its suggestive power. Even in its simplest forms, it invites us to go beyond what is said to what is implied. Since it suggests many ideas with few words, literature is ideal for generating language discussion. Maximum output

can often be derived from minimum input. Ambiguity: as it is highly suggestive and associative, literature speaks subtly different meanings to different people. It is rare for two readers to react identically to any given text. In teaching, this has two advantages. The first advantage is that each learner's interpretation has validity within limits. The second advantage is that an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed since each person's perception is different. That no two readers will have a completely convergent interpretation establishes the tension that is necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas.

2. THE BENEFITS OF USING STORIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH

Most English textbooks tend to remain at the mundane and utilitarian level of basic dialogues and daily activities. Stories address universal themes and offer the learners opportunities to play with ideas and feelings and think about and talk about important issues.

Reading is one of the most effective ways of learning a language. Our ability to use our mother language is constantly improved through on-going and extensive reading. The same is true to foreign language learning. Reading short stories is a time-proven method of language learning and acquisition.

Collie and Slater (1991, p.196) list the advantages of using short stories for language teachers: short stories are practical as their length is long enough to cover entirely in one or two class sessions; they are not complicated for students to work with on their own; they have a variety of choice for different interests and tastes; and they can be used with all levels, all ages and all classes. Hirvela and Boyle (1988) examine students' attitude towards four genres of literary texts (short story, novel, poetry and drama) and state that their adult Hong Kong Chinese students indicated short stories as the genre that is less feared and the second most enjoyed, since short stories are easy to finish and definite to understand.

Short fiction is a supreme resource for observing not only language but life itself. In short fiction, characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives, and do so in a variety of registers and tones. The world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives (Sage, 1987, p.43). The inclusion of short fiction in the ESL/EFL curriculum offers the following educational benefits (Ariogul, 2001, pp.11-18): makes the students' reading task easier due to being simple and short when compared with the other literary genres; enlarge the advanced level readers' worldviews about different cultures and different groups of people; provides more creative, encrypt, challenging texts that require personal exploration supported with prior knowledge for advanced level readers; motivates learners to read due to being an authentic material; offers a world of wonders and a

world of mystery; gives students the chance to use their creativity; promotes critical thinking skills; facilitates teaching a foreign culture (i.e. serves as a valuable instrument in attaining cultural knowledge of the selected community); makes students feel themselves comfortable and free; helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings; act as a perfect vehicle to help students understand the positions of themselves as well as the others by transferring these gained knowledge to their own world. In brief, the use of a short story seems to be a very helpful technique in today's foreign language classes. As it is short, it makes the students' reading task and the teacher's coverage easier. An important feature of short fiction is its being universal. To put it differently, students all over the world have experienced stories and can relate to them. Moreover, short fiction, like all other types of literature, makes contribution to the development of cognitive analytical abilities by bringing the whole self to bear on a compressed account of a situation in a single place and moment (Sage, 1987, p.43)

3. THE BENEFITS OF USING NOVEL TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

The use of novel is a beneficial technique for mastering not only linguistic system but also life in relation to the target language. In novel, characters reflect what people really perform in daily lives. Novels not only portray but also enlighten human lives. Using novel in a foreign language class offers the following educational benefits: Develops the advanced level readers' knowledge about different cultures and different groups of people; increase students' motivation to read owing to being an authentic material; offers real life/real life like settings; gives students the opportunity to make use of their creativity; improves critical thinking skills; paves the way for teaching the target language culture; enables students to go beyond what is written and dive into what is meant. Helton, C.A, J. Asamani and E.D. Thomas (1998, pp.1-5) expounds the educational benefits of novels as follows: stimulates their imagination; helps students to identify the emotions of the characters so that they can learn how others cope with situations and problems similar to their own experiences; helps them master the skills that will enable them to acquire information, process this knowledge, identify problems, formulate alternatives, and arrive at meaningful, thoughtful, effective decisions and solutions; develops oral and written language skill; serves as a springboard for a multitude of holistic learning and critical thinking activities beginning with basic comprehension and writing; presents a unique way of teaching reading by getting students involved and excited about the reading process; motivates students to become a lifelong reader.

4. STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH STORIES

When English teachers become more familiar with the acquisition-based methodology, they are more willing to use stories from literature to enhance their teaching. Stories can be used to supplement teaching or to create self-contained units of work, which can provide rich context for various language activities involving learners actively and creatively.

4.1 Retell the Story

The best way to learn English is to teach it. In order to teach something, you need to have a thorough understanding of the material. Likewise, if students are required to retell the story to their classmates, they are under the pressure to master the story, which will spur them to try every means to understand the story. Thus, they will take the initiative to look up new words in the dictionary and check out the relevant background information on the Internet. The process of preparing for retelling the story is a very efficient way to master the story and language itself as well.

4.2 Make a Story With Random Chosen Words

This is a more challenging task and need more creativity to complete it. It is also a good way to review vocabularies creatively. Choose five words that the students have learnt recently and ask students to come up with a story which contains all these words either individually or in groups. Using words newly learnt can help students to turn their passive words into active words. Since the students have total freedom in making any kind of story they want to make, their motivation will be high. Funny stories from the students can add spices to the classroom teaching.

4.3 Complete an Unfinished Story

Divide the story into several sections. When the students finish reading one section, ask them to predict or imagine what will happen next. This can be organized through group discussion followed by writing. Different groups can compare their versions of the story development. If the story happens to concern a controversial issue, this can be a starter for further discussion or debate.

4.4 Dramatize the Story

After reading the story and a fully discussion about the story, the teacher can ask the students to dramatize the story. That is to say, they will act out the story according to their understanding of the story. This will also turn their receptive skill of reading into productive skill of speaking. In order to put on a good show, the students need to have a thorough understanding of the story, and give their imagination a full play.

4.5 Use Story as a Model or Subject Matter for Writing

Good story can be a motivating source for writing practice either as a model or a subject matter. When students are required to learn the story by heart and then rewrite the story, trying to keep the original content and style, they are using the story as a model. When students analyze the story and explore the implication of the story, they are using the story as a subject matter.

Writing can even occur before students begin to read a story. The teacher can discuss its theme or the issue it raises and the students write about it with reference to their own life experiences. This helps interest them in the story and makes them ready for reading and writing about it. Most writing assignments done during as well as after the reading, however, derive from class discussion. They take many forms, such as questions to be answered, assertions to be debated, or topics to be expanded, discussion groups to be established. Teacher can also use a story as a springboard for composition-creative assignments developed around plot, characters, setting, theme, and figurative language. The students can add to the story, change the story, write a drama based on the story, or write a letter to another character, etc. Adding to the work: this comprises writing imaginary episodes or sequels, or, in the case of drama, “filling in” scenes for off-stage actions that are only referred to in the dialog. Changing the work: students can make up their own endings by comparing the author’s ending to their own. Short stories can be rewritten in whole or in part from the point of view of character versus a third person narrator or of a different character. Drama-inspired writing: it is possible to derive drama-inspired writing activities from plays, short stories, novels, and sometimes poetry. The student steps into the consciousness of a character and writes about that character’s attitudes and feelings. A letter addressed to another character: the student can write a letter to one of the characters, in which he/she gives the character personal advice about how to overcome a particular problem or situation (Stern, 1991, p.336)

5. THERE ARE THREE MAIN KINDS OF WRITING THAT CAN BE BASED ON LITERATURE AS A MODEL

5.1 Controlled Writing

Controlled model-based exercises which are used mostly in beginning-level writing typically require rewriting passages in arbitrary ways to practice specific grammatical structures. For instance, students can be reporters doing a live newscast, or they can rewrite a third person passage into first person from a character’s point of view.

Guided writing: this activity corresponds to intermediate-level ESL/EFL. Students respond to a

series of questions or complete sentences which, when put together, retell or sum up the model. In some cases, students complete the exercise after they receive the first few sentences or the topic sentence of a summary, paraphrase, or description. Guided writing exercises, especially at the literal level, enable students to comprehend the work. Model approach and scenario approach are very beneficial in this respect.

5.2 Reproducing the Model

This activity comprises techniques like paraphrase, summary, and adaptation. These techniques are very beneficial ESL/EFL writing exercises. In paraphrasing, students are required to use their own words to rephrase the things that they see in print or hear aloud. Since paraphrase coincides with the students’ trying to make sense of the poem, it is a strikingly useful tool with poetry. Summary work goes well with realistic short stories and plays, where events normally follow a chronological order and have concrete elements like plot, setting, and character to guide student writing. Adaptation requires rewriting prose fiction into dialog or, reversely, rewriting a play or a scene into narrative. This activity enables students to be aware of the variations between written and spoken English (Stern, 1991, p.333)

6. LITERATURE AS SUBJECT MATTER FOR WRITING

Finding appropriate material for their writing classes is sometimes difficult for composition teachers since writing has no subject matter of its own. One benefit of having literature as the reading content of a composition course is that the readings become the subject matter for compositions. In a composition course whose reading content is literature, students make inferences, formulate their own ideas, and look closely at a text for evidence to support generalizations. Thus, they learn how to think creatively, freely and critically. Such training helps them in other courses which require logical reasoning, independent thinking, and careful analysis of the text (Spack, 1985, p.719).

6.1 Literature, Speaking, and Listening

The study of literature in a language class, though being mainly associated with reading and writing, can play an equally meaningful role in teaching both speaking and listening. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-play, pantomiming, reenactment, discussion, and group activities may center on a work of literature.

Oral Reading

Language teachers can make listening comprehension and pronunciation interesting, motivating and contextualized at the upper levels, playing a recording or video of a literature work, or reading literature aloud themselves.

Having students read literature aloud contributes to developing speaking as well listening ability. Moreover, it also leads to improving pronunciation. Pronunciation may be the focus before, during, and/or after the reading.

6.2 Literature-Based Dramatic Activities

Needless to say, literature-based dramatic activities are valuable for ESL/EFL. They facilitate and accelerate development of the oral skills since they motivate students to achieve clearer comprehension of a work's plot and a deeper comprehension and awareness of its characters. Though drama in the classroom can assume many forms, there are three main types, which are dramatization, role-playing, and improvisation.

Dramatization requires classroom performance of scripted materials. Students can make up their own scripts for short stories or sections of novels, adapting them as closely as possible to the real text. Based on the story, they must guess what the characters would say and how they would say it. Scripts written by students are also probable with plays. Poems comprising one or more personae may also be scripted by students. Students should attentively read assigned sections of dialog in advance and be able to answer questions about characters and plot. They should indicate vocabulary, idioms, or dialog they do not understand and words they cannot pronounce. Students next rehearse the scene with their partners. Although they don't memorize it, they learn it well enough to make eye contact and say their lines with meaning and feeling. Moreover, they discuss semiotic aspects of staging the scene (i.e. facial expressions, gestures, and the physical aspects). At last, the dramatization is presented before the class.

6.2.1 Improvisation and Role-Playing

Both improvisation and role-playing may be developed around the characters, plot, and themes of a literary work. Improvisation is a more systematic activity, i.e., a dramatization without a script. There is an identifiable plot with a beginning, middle, and end in improvisation. However, in role playing, students picture characters from the work being read and join in a speaking activity other than a dramatization, such as an interview or panel discussion.

6.2.2 Group Activities

Making each student responsible for facts and ideas to be contributed and discussed, group activities stimulates total participation. All students are involved and the participation is multidirectional. When teaching English through literature, some of the group activities used in language classroom are general class discussion, small-group work, panel discussions, and debates. All of these group activities both develop the speaking abilities of the students and give importance to pronunciation practice. Teachers indicate pronunciation errors of the students during the act of such activities so as to correct such errors (Stern, 1991, p.337)

7. REQUIREMENT OF TEACHERS USING STORY-BASED APPROACH

Though the story-based approach to teach English is appealing, it is not a panacea. In order to tap its potential, teachers should read extensively to select the right stories for particular group of students, and be flexible in ways of using stories. Classroom management skills are also very important in organizing a variety of classroom activities. Just like creativity is the key to a good story, creativity is also the key to a successful teaching approach based on stories. Teachers should develop their storytelling skills and familiarize themselves with different ways of making authentic language accessible to their students. They should also develop techniques to organize activities for exploiting the language in stories.

During the selection and adaptation of short stories, teachers should bear in mind the aim of the course, needs, motivation, interests and language levels of the students and the content of the stories in order to make the best of it. The most important criterion of a good story for teaching purpose is whether it can involve the students personally by arousing their interest and eliciting strong, positive reactions from them. Reading a literary text is more likely to have a long-term and valuable effect upon the learners' linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge when it is meaningful and amusing. Choosing books relevant to the real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner is of great importance. Language difficulty has to be considered as well. If the language of the literary work is simple, this may facilitate the comprehensibility of the literary text but is not in itself the most crucial criterion. Interest, appeal, and relevance are also prominent. Enjoyment; a fresh insight into issues felt to be related to the heart of people's concerns; the pleasure of encountering one's own thoughts or situations exemplified clearly in a work of art; the other, equal pleasure of noticing those same thoughts, feelings, emotions, or situations presented by a completely new perspective: all these are motives helping learners to cope with the linguistic obstacles that might be considered too great in less involving material (Collie and Slater, 1990, pp.6-7)

When selecting a novel to be used in the foreign language class, the language teacher should pay attention to whether the novel has an intriguing story that will be of interest to the entire class. Themes and settings captivating their imagination and exploring the human condition should be included in the nature of the selected novels. Novel should have a powerful, fast-paced plot and interesting, well delineated, memorable characters. The content of the novel should be suitable to students' cognitive and emotional levels. Specific items and concepts being developed in class should also be incorporated within the novel.

Stories can play an important role in teaching four basic language skills like reading, writing, listening and

speaking. However, when using stories in the language classroom, skills should not be taught in isolation but in an integrated way. Teachers should try to teach basic language skills as an integral part of oral and written language, not merely as an aspect of the oral and written production of words, phrases and sentences.

Teachers should adopt a dynamic, student-centered approach toward comprehension of a literary work. In reading lesson, discussion begins at the literal level with direct questions of fact regarding setting, characters, and plot which can be answered by specific reference to the text. When students master literal understanding, they move to the inferential level, where they must make speculations and interpretations concerning the characters, setting and theme, and where they produce the author's point of view. After comprehending a literary selection at the literary and inferential levels, students are ready to do a collaborative work. They share their evaluations of the work and their personal reactions to it—to its characters, its theme, and the author's point of view. This is also suitable time for them to share their reactions to the work's natural cultural issues and themes. The third level, the personal/evaluative level simulates students to think imaginatively about the work and provokes their problem-solving abilities. Discussion deriving from such questions can be the foundation for oral and written activities (Stern, 1991, p.332)

CONCLUSION

Using literature in English class will enhance students' interest in English and encourage them to read extensively after class, which will in turn improve their language proficiency in an all round way. However, what every English teacher should bear in mind is that literature itself won't guarantee the success of English teaching. It is the teacher who plays a key role in the use of literature in English teaching. The use of the same story may vary

from teacher to teacher and from class to class because every class is unique and every teacher has his or her own way of teaching. What is essential is a thorough understanding of students' needs, language levels and interests before deciding on which literary work to select and how to use it in class.

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