# Using literature to enhance language skills for EFL learners

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**Abstract**

The integration of literature contributes to the development of the thinking process as well as to the cultural background of learners. This paper aims to investigate the role of literature in enhancing and developing language skills; reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As an attempt to make learning effective, a student-centered approach will be adopted. The paper first explores the reasons for choosing literature as a source for language learning, and then the challenges that face English Foreign Language learners in classrooms. As an attempt to facilitate learning, some creative ways will be included. The findings reveal that developing language skills through literature depends on the techniques and strategies that teachers use in the classroom. The study suggests that teachers should plan a new curriculum that places learners at the core of the learning process.

**Keywords:** challenges; EFL learners; language skills; literature.

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## 1. Introduction:

Integrating literature as an approach to teaching language skills is an interesting subject. Literature provides learners with suitable tools to enhance their learning at different levels. Through its various genres, learners can develop their skills effectively. Positions towards using literature in EFL classrooms vary between supporters and opponents (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). Those latter, believe that literature is difficult, and learners do not have the suitable abilities to go through (Medeiros et al., 2018). Whereas those who are in favour think that literature is an effective tool in the learning process.

Literature is not only used for entertainment but also teaching and instructing (Strogilos & King-Sears, 2019). In recent years, many scholars have recommended using literature as an approach to teaching language skills. This recommendation is based on the fact that literature is a source of linguistic and cultural issues. They claim that teaching literature develops the learners' language, culture, and imagination.

### 1.1. Purpose of study

Literature plays a key role in teaching language; it enables learners to use their skills and to communicate with their colleagues. This paper examines the role of literary texts in developing learners' language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening.

## 2. Method

This research is a discussion paper that discusses the role of literary texts in developing language skills. The study discusses genres, prose, poetry, and drama under literature and how it aids in language development. Data is collected from previous research and discussed accordingly.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The Role of Literature in Language Learning

With its main genres, prose, poetry, and drama, literature provides authentic learning material. Reading novels and poems, attending, and performing plays motivate learners to go deep into literary works. They can read, analyse and interpret. Al-Mahrooqi (2011, p. 73) states that literary genres provide learners with:

> all kinds of communicative techniques that speakers use in their interactions, and so it can serve as a teaching aid for all language skills. Since it represents authentic language, the interactions it portrays are natural and meaningful, not contrived and context-free. Literature portrays the broad human experience and so, if presented at an appropriate language level and handled effectively by the teacher, it can engage learners emotionally, morally, and intellectually... Therefore, it can help learners become global thinkers and develop an appreciation of foreign as well as local cultures.

In their book, *Literature in the Language Classroom,* Collie and Slater (1987, p. 3) confirm that literary texts provide 'authentic' tools for learning. They point out that reading literary texts provide learners with basic language structures and makes the language more familiar. They see literature as:

> a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are more memorable. Reading a substantial and contextualised body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language- the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas- which broaden and enrich their writing skills (p. 5).

Reading literary texts in the classroom creates a space of discussion between teachers and learners or among learners themselves. In addition, it enables learners to analyse and interpret depending on their thoughts and skills. Through analysis of literary texts, students become able to express their

points of view, use new terms, imagine, or expect the ending of the story. In addition, they become able to build up the plot using different vocabularies.

Each literary genre contributes to the development of language skills differently. For example, teaching novels and plays is easier than poems. Students have negative feelings towards poetry because of difficult terms and extensive use of literary devices that need an interpretation. Thus, Literature enhances the reading skills by enabling learners to analyse language through exploring figures of speech, symbols, and other literary techniques that enhance meaning. Plays in particular are useful in two ways. They enhance their listening and speaking skills through attending and performing.

Using literature as a teaching tool needs a careful selection of material especially poetry. Although it is difficult in comparison with the other genres, poetry enables students to develop their language skills through form and content. Almahrooqi (2012 pp. 154) says that "poetry is a source of content-rich reading material, a model of creative language in use, a way to introduce vocabulary in context, and a way to focus students' attention on English pronunciation, rhythm, and stress''.

As mentioned previously, the literature includes the necessary tools that enhance language learning. The author's style, literary devices, and sentence structure help students to acquire the language basics. Teachers should encourage students to interact with each other to practice language. The practice contributes to the mastery of speaking and listening skills in particular. Therefore, practicing a language needs integration and communication between students. In this case, the teacher plays the role of the instructor by correcting the speaking errors.

On the other hand, reading literary works enables learners to develop ideas about different periods in history, reading about the challenges that people faced around the world, exploring traditions and customs of societies. Literature promotes also intercultural discourse, Teachers should select culturally, socially, and even religiously acceptable songs to work on in the classroom. These can motivate students to engage in self-study and benefit their knowledge of intonation, rhythm, rhyme, and vocabulary.

### 3.2. Reasons for Integrating Literature in EFL Classroom

The role of literature in teaching language skills is undeniable. It is used as a source of stimulation and inspiration. Literary texts may include different activities that ''develop reading and writing skills, vocabulary acquisition, and grammar knowledge'' ( Naji et al, 2019, pp. 26). Literature makes learners aware of language and provides them with authentic material. In the same context, Maley (2012, pp. 300) emphasizes the effectiveness of using literary texts "Literary texts certainly continue to offer a rich and varied linguistic resource, and as such, provide the kind of input for phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discoursal acquisition regarded by many as essential for effective language learning''.

Analysing literary texts helps learners to understand the target language, and to develop their awareness of language. Lazar (1993, pp. 23) explains the relationship between literary texts and language, she different reasons for using literary texts to teach language. She states

> Detailed analysis of the language of the literary text will help students to make meaningful interpretations or informed evaluations of it. At the same time, students will increase their general awareness and understanding of English. Students are encouraged to draw on their knowledge of familiar grammatical, lexical, or discoursal categories to make aesthetic judgements of the text.

Literary genres are considered rich sources for the language learning process. Each literary genre contributes to language learning differently. The choice of literature as an approach to teaching language skills is due to different reasons which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### 3.3. Novels and Short Stories

Through studying novels and short stories, learners are not only concerned with language, but also with real-life situations, cultural aspects of different societies, and human experiences. Floris (2004, p. 2) sees that learners "become broadly aware of the social, political, historical, or cultural events happening in a particular society".

Using both genres helps learners to learn reading and speaking skills. They include vivid and inspiring themes which align with real-life circumstances. In addition to the reading skills, these genres increase the learners' awareness about the external world, develop their imagination and improve their speaking skills.

The analysis of the different aspects of novels enables learners to develop the four language skills. Through reading, analysing, and interpreting, learners become creative. So that learners give their interpretations concerning events, characters, and style. Taking novels as a rich source, teachers should encourage learners to read outside the classroom.

### 3.4. Poetry

The integration of poems in language learning is an effective way in education. Poetry is a rich source for language learners. Both form and content are beneficial. Hall (2005 pp. 14) mentions that poetry's language is important, he writes: "The 'dominant' feature of a poem is that it draws the reader's attention to the language it uses''. It introduces vocabulary, syntax, sentences structured in special ways (verses). In addition to rhythmic patterns, stress, rhymes, and other elements. Teaching poetry reinforces the speaking skill, teachers motivate learners to read poems loudly using poetic elements. In this case, students learn the right pronunciation and at the same time, they learn the rules of poetry. Teachers facilitate the difficulties they may face in the learning process. In addition to skills, poetry involves learners' feelings, emotions, and imagination.

On the other hand, teachers may encourage talented students to write poems. By the end of each session, learners can present what they wrote so that their colleagues can encourage them too. Students become more creative and develop their imagination. These activities engage students in the learning process and enable teachers to motivate learners to overcome their anxiety towards literature.

### 3.5. Plays

The role of plays in teaching language skills is significant. Through play, learners can develop reading, listening, and speaking skills. Performing plays also develops communication between learners. Both teachers and learners favour this type of literature because it gives space for learners to express themselves. Involving students in role-playing enhances collective work. Learners act their scripts, play the role of characters, and interact with each other. This type of literature contributes to the learners' character through the issues they act. So, the aim here is not only to teach language skills but also to deduce moral lessons. Roleplay integrates oral and speaking skills effectively.

In addition, drama provides learners with new vocabularies, dialogues, and communication skills. Hişmanoğlu (2005, pp. 63) summarises the various reasons for using drama as follows:

> drama seems to be an effective technique in today's communication-based, student-centered foreign language teaching. Since it is authentic material, it helps students to promote their comprehension of the verbal/nonverbal aspects of the target language they are trying to master. Particularly, teachers, who wish to make language learning more colorful, motivating, and interesting, can make use of drama in their language classes.

The use of literary genres is an efficient way of teaching language skills. They are rich and varied sources of language proficiency and communicative techniques. The success of the learning process

using those genres depends on both teachers and learners who should play active roles and overcome the challenges they face.

### 3.6. Challenges of Using Literature in EFL Classroom

Using literary texts as material in EFL classrooms creates several challenges for both teachers and learners. One of the main challenges is the teacher's choice of teaching strategies. Some teachers lose communication with learners because of the use of traditional and rigid methods of teaching. The absence of an organized course design disorients teachers (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014, p. 249).

Another challenge is the unfamiliarity of students with literary texts. Most students do not read literature outside classrooms. The lack of reading leads to a lack of vocabulary background. While reading a literary text, learners face different new terms and expressions. The role of the instructor here is to guide learners and tries to facilitate the material as much as possible. Al-Mahrooqi (2012, p. 5) thinks that ''The complexity of the language and the foreignness of the context make English literature hard to grasp by students with limited language proficiency''. In this case, teachers should try to avoid the confusion felt by learners by providing a list of the difficult terms and explaining them.

The abilities of students are another challenge that teachers should take into consideration. The different levels of EFL students may create difficulty for teachers to achieve the course target. Therefore, they should choose a text which suits the learners' level. To facilitate the learning process, teachers can introduce the text, its background, the period within which it was written, and the main techniques that the writer uses (Lazar. p. 52).

Text selection is another challenge that teachers face. Many considerations should be taken into account, the learners' abilities, their needs, the course's objectives, and the text's length. However, selecting unfamiliar and long texts may cause discomfort for learners. In addition, choosing long literary texts with unfamiliar vocabularies demotivates learners. Both long literary texts and unfamiliar words prevent instructors from achieving the course objectives (Floris, 2004, pp. 5).

The choice of the genre is important. Asking a student to read a novel or a poem is itself a challenge. The length of novels and the complicated structure of poems confuse learners and lead them to ignore the course. To overcome this challenge, instructors should choose short and simple literary works such as short stories and plays because their language is simple, and to shift from teacher's centredness to learner's centredness. Shifting from passive learners to active participants in story analysis or role play.

### 3.7. Effective Ways of Teaching Language Skills through Literature

Using literature as material in the EFL classroom is a challenging task. Taking into consideration the different circumstances of learners, instructors should find effective strategies to integrate literary texts into the learning process. In this context, teachers have to choose literary pieces that suite the different abilities of learners. As literature is a multidimensional issue, teachers must use it not only as a tool of instruction but of education too.

Learners may find difficulties in reading literary texts. To avoid this, teachers should adopt new and effective ways of education to motivate them and to ensure the efficient acquisition of skills. They should be selective when choosing literary texts to integrate the four skills. The choice depends on both the abilities of learners and on the aim of the instructor. Yadav (2014) points out:

> *The nature of the course should be considered while choosing. Nature of the syllabus is decided according to the levels of the learners and their reason for learning the language. Nature of the learners is also equally significant. Here, the age of the learner is an important factor. If the learner is not mature enough to understand the text then the facilitator should find a text which fits the maturity level of the learner's mind (396).*

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Teachers should explore the most effective ways that inspire learners, and at the same time develop their skills. Starting from using short literary texts to facilitate reading. Teachers should introduce the literary piece, talking about the writer, the characteristics of the period in which the text was written. So that, learners would have a background about the piece.

Instructors should also advise learners to read the literary piece more than one reading. Taking notes in this phase is necessary. For example, the setting, the names of characters, the main events…etc. The second or third readings enable the learner to move from reading to exploring the language of the work.

A teacher should give space for learners to give their feedback. Before going into details, learners can give their views about the text. Their experiences during reading, difficulties they faced. Here, learners learn how to express their points of view as well as develop their speaking skills through the correction of errors by teachers.

Teachers should avoid long literary works to attract the learners' attention. Through well-planned sessions, teachers can include different genres. Each genre contributes to developing a specific skill differently. If teachers want to use a long text, they may divide the work into parts. For example, if the teacher wants to use a long novel, he/she can ask each student to read a chapter, each student summarizes his/ her chapter by the end all students will have an idea about the whole work. This way creates suspense because each student thinks about what is coming next.

Using new ways, teachers develop senses of creative and critical reading within learners. First students are asked to read a given number of chapters, moving from one chapter to another, summarizing, analysing, and interpreting events. Students were asked to shape the plot according to their points of view. After that, discussions about the different aspects of the literary work. This way develops the oral skills of students in an effective way. In addition, teachers may mention important extracts that help students to depend on when they are asked to write about themes for example. So that, students develop their writing skills and at the same time their vocabulary.

As literature needs discussion, teachers should avoid the traditional ways of giving handouts, which makes the learning process uninteresting. Hence, students instead of reading summaries on websites, read authentic literary works. In this case, teachers should integrate new ways to motivate learners such as integrating group discussions, using videos, data-shaws, academic platforms, and technology.

However, in a highly technologized world, teachers should go beyond the walls of classrooms. They should be creative in a way that they work to develop the learners' skills using innovative and motivating ways. As a first step, learners should move from being passive to active participants. Teachers may create blogs, forums, or google classroom accounts. From a personal experience with google classroom, students were highly motivated. A huge number of students joined the classroom. After introducing the literary text, I post a question about their views about themes, character analysis, style, and plot, students were responsive. They write their own views, comment on each other, and use illustrations. This way is highly effective because it doesn't contribute only to the writing skill but also to the use of technology. Although the classroom is virtual, a feeling of comfort is clear.

The evaluation also has a role in developing language skills. Teachers should avoid direct questions. They should push learners to use their own words by giving statements or quotations to discuss and explain. In this case, learners find themselves writing using their styles. On the one hand, they develop their writing skill, and on the other hand, critical thinking is developed as well.

To avoid learners' boredom, teachers should involve learners in the learning process through creating different tasks, such as project works, presentations, group activities, and role-plays which enable bring learners with different abilities to interact with each other. Hişmanoglu (2005, pp. 59) states that "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-playing, pantomiming, re-enactment, discussion, and group activities may center on a work of literature".

### 4. Conclusion

Using literature as a tool to develop language skills is multidimensional. The choice of literary texts to enhance language learning develops both learners' skills and culture. The instructor should not only focus on the language but also on the role of the text to educate and instruct the learner. This paper highlighted the necessity to use literature in the learning process. And the way language skills are developed through reading, discussing, and interpreting literary texts. The study showed also that literary texts encourage learners to be more creative. Teachers should reinforce learners' awareness about the necessity of using literary texts in EFL classrooms.

In addition, the competence of teachers in organizing and selecting materials is necessary. The effectiveness of the learning process depends on the role of teachers, who should adopt new and various ways of teaching to motivate learners and to avoid boredom. Using technology makes difference for both teachers and learners, it provides them with the necessary material. In the end, the success of the learning process depends on the right integration of material and skills which leads to the development of the learner's language and culture.

The paper calls for encouraging syllabi designers to include literary texts in advanced levels of teaching to make learners aware of foreign language and culture at early ages. Also, the choice of texts should be pre-planned and well issued to suit the learners' needs and course objectives. Teachers should play the role of facilitators and give space for learners to work and develop their skills. Another recommendation is that teachers should enhance the learners' awareness about literary texts, providing them with the necessary strategies to read and analyse. Also, teachers should choose literary texts which integrate the four skills altogether and facilitate the learning process. Finally, teachers/instructors should focus on shifting the learners' focus on reading for developing themselves rather than their marks.

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