

Teaching Literature in EFL Classroom: Challenges and Prospects - Libyan context

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Abstract:

This paper explores the relevance of teaching literature in an EFL classroom, with due consideration to the challenges and prospects of teaching the subject. In Libya, the surge in the demand for the English language has seen institutions of learning across the country vigorously embracing the language teaching, at various levels and specialties, but with limited success. Many reasons have been advanced to explain the devastating results including the insufficient exposure to the language real experience through literature. Studies have shown that literature is only partially incorporated within the school curriculum, although that it is an important component of effective language learning process. In this paper, we have, therefore, sought to address the nature of challenges and hindrances that have stood in the path of successful teaching of literature, enumerating and highlighting specific problems in order to allow the competent authorities and institutions to furnish reliable solutions. Several model approaches to teaching literature that suit different goals have also been suggested, with the view that if properly applied students' language skills and creativeness will be improved and harnessed, above all literature will be popularized within the classroom and beyond.

Key words: teaching literature, EFL classroom, Libyan English literary curriculum

الأدب في مقرر اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية: الحالة الليبية

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الورقة في أهمية تدريس الأدب داخل القاعة الدراسية للغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية، مع مراعاة تحديات وآفاق تدريس هذا الموضوع. ففي ليبيا، أدى الارتفاع الكبير في الطلب على اللغة الإنكليزية

إلى تبني مؤسسات التعليم في جميع أنحاء البلاد بقوة تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية في مختلف المستويات والتخصصات، لكن تبين أن ذلك يتم بنجاح محدود. وقد تم تقديم العديد من الأسباب لشرح النتائج السلبية الناتجة عن هذا الإخفاق بما في ذلك عدم كفاية التعرض للمواقف اللغوية الحقيقية من خلال الأدب. وقد أظهرت الدراسات أن الأدب يشكل جزءاً بسيطاً فقط في المناهج الدراسية، على الرغم من أنه عنصر مهم في عملية تعلم اللغة بفاعلية كبيرة. لذلك سعينا في هذه الورقة إلى معالجة طبيعة التحديات والعوائق التي وقفت في طريق التدريس الناجح للأدب، مع محاولة حصر وإبراز مشاكل محددة من وذلك لتنبه الجهات والمؤسسات المختصة بتقديم حلول معقولة. كما تم أيضاً اقتراح العديد من الأساليب النموذجية لتدريس الأدب التي تتلاءم مع مختلف الأهداف المبتغاة. مع الأخذ في الحسبان الرأي القائل بأنه إذا تم العمل على تحسين مهارات الطلاب اللغوية تحسين وإبداعاتهم بالشكل الصحيح، فإن ذلك سيؤدي إلى تعميق دراسة الأدب قبل كل شيء داخل الفصل الدراسي وخارجه.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الأدب وتدريسه، اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة ثانية، المقررات الأدبية في ليبيا.

Introduction

One thing is certain, any attempt to undermine the power of literature in an EFL classroom will always have a detrimental effect. In essence, literature is a reservoir of a vast amount of information and knowledge, beside the huge sum of vocabularies, grammar and expressions that students encounter while reading a novel or a play or listening to or reading a poem, which ought to be properly explored and exploited in order to enhance their level of proficiency in the use of English language. It is generally acknowledged that 'literature is language in practice,' which is palpably clear when we consider the linguistic components, concepts and styles in play in any piece of literary work. Richard Ihejirika (2014) sums up, indubitably, the relationship between literature and language in the following statement:

'language theories, concepts and styles are put into function in the creation of literary texts. Therefore, if one must interpret and analyse a literary text, one must be competent in the language of the text, and conversely, if one must be competent

in language, one should be sufficiently exposed to the literature of the language in question.’ (p. 85).

The noted direct correlation between literature and language acquisition is what Ihijerika refers to as a ‘symbiotic relationship between literature and English language,’ which indicates that it is highly implausible to comprehend literary work without language reference. In this case, it follows that the appreciation of literary work will provide students with the experiment of varied linguistic resources in a single attempt and all together on one occasion. That is how far realistic the embrace of literature can go. In the Libyan context, to a greater extent, the outlook is bleak. Literature has been left staggering along the EFL classroom corridors without being let in, which has caused severe dislocation between language learning and usage. Meanwhile, the inordinate emphasis has been put on various aspects of linguistic theories and concepts, considering literature only as a paltry module and somewhat complementary in language acquisition process. In other words, in some cases it is only presented in instances where it is required to uphold what has been explicated linguistically, but not in itself. This is coupled with the reluctance to adopt complete versions of literary works, and an unmistakable wide usage of abridged and sometimes debased translated forms in a classroom in various higher institutions of learning, which clearly explains the lax attitude towards literature. Moreover, with limited or insufficient reading materials and their inaccessibility student’s language growth and imagination are stagnated forever.

Relevance of Literature

Literature, as written works with artistic values, entails all forms of fiction, which include: novels, short stories, plays and poems – in prose and verse, the overall effect of which is overwhelming. In a famous statement by Horace (65-8 BC), the Greek poet and satirist, he observed that literature is designed ‘to delight and to instruct’ (Carlson, 2009), which stresses the element of entertainment and instruction, in addition to the aesthetic experience. Horace’s observation is well embraced by Onuekwusi (2013), whose definition captures the essence of literature in its entirety. He writes:

Literature is "any imaginative and beautiful creation in words, whether oral or written, which explores man as he struggles to survive in his existential position and which provides entertainment, information, education and excitement to its audience" (p. 5) (Quoted in Ihejirika (2014)).

Besides, language scholars and practitioners have concurred with each other in not only asserting the importance of literature as a vital learning material (Khatib, M. et al, 2011), but also in setting down specifically the advantages and relevant issues that literature deals with. Duff & Maley (2008) sum up the merits of literature as follows:

- Linguistically, literature offers a range of authentic texts in a variety of registers appropriate to a social situation or used for communicating with a particular set of people. This presents to learners a rich reservoir for vocabulary acquisition, expressions and comprehensions, in a meaningful and memorable context.
- Culturally – literature is a vehicle for culture, especially when considering settings, characterisations, situations and assumptions, which provide awareness of difference and develop tolerance and understanding. Literature, undoubtedly, reflects a good deal of reality through the various literary tools; and thus it is an essential component in Cultural Studies.

In the two important texts that would become the backbone of Postcolonial studies, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said discusses the Western intellectuals attitudes towards the East, and in particular towards the Middle East, drawing extensively from their literary works.

- Literature involves affect and emotion, which are the perfect medium for engaging students in their learning of the language. Literary texts require imaginative interpretation of the reality they present. In this case, 'literature is a particularly good source for developing students' abilities to infer meaning and to make interpretations.' (Widdowson (1975), quoted in Duff & Maley (2008)).

Additionally, Ihejirika (2014) sees a bona fide relevance of literature as latent in its ability to create a 'stable and mature personality.' He observes:

"a good literature can be an important aid to cultural assimilation or acculturation; language development and competence; conflict resolution; emotional development and stability; development of positive and good-oriented attitudes to life; a good liberal education, entertainment, relaxation and the sharing of vicarious experiences of positive value; the development of desired and desirable moral or other attributes; and as a consequence of all these, a stable and mature personality." (p. 85)

As for teaching English literature to enhance the learning of English in Libyan institutions, it is noticed that during the past decade, there have been a limited number of research studies conducted in Libya in relation to the teaching of literature as an authentic text (e.g. El-Naili, 2006; Elbadri, 2009; Abubaker, 2012; Pathan, 2013). Quoted in Mohamed. P. 31-52 (2019).

However, in the 1970s until 1986 - when English was put to the minimum in the curricula in state institutions in Libya - there was a concentration on teaching literature at the secondary and university stage levels. For example, from my own experience as a student in Early 1980s, Literary section in secondary school education (year12) used to study an abridged Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, while Scientific section students of the same stage used to study *The Time Machine* as a science fiction novella by H. G. Wells.

However, by the beginning of the third millennium, English language teaching became a great focus in the Ministry of Education in Libya. Abu-baker goes on to say that " One of the main objectives outlined by the National Report of the General People's Committee of

Education (GPCE) in 2008 states that for the development of education in Libya, emphasis must be put on the learning of a foreign language, namely English, in order to communicate with others in the globalized community. This, however, was not always the case" (Abu-baker 2017:19).

Challenges of teaching literature.

As far as the Libyan context is concerned, a set of challenges and obstacles facing English language teaching in general, and literature in particular, ought to be overcome before literature is made at home in Libyan institutions. Although some of these challenges are found within classrooms, the major ones transcend the institutions of learning.

- Education policy and system

In theory, an education policy or system ought to be the vehicle for progress but not a cause for challenges and hindrances towards the advancement of knowledge. However, there is a direct correlation between the blurry education policy and the growth retardation of English language learning in the Libyan context, let alone literature. Lack of proper planning and facilitation of educational materials by the competent authorities to address and redress specific policies to do with curriculum and English language teaching remains a nightmare. This fact is accentuated by Tantani (2012), who explores, among other things the complexities in teaching practice in Libyan secondary schools and how they have incapacitated the education system to deliver good results, particularly in the teaching of the English language. For instance, Tantani asserts that the teaching method of the English language is mostly traditional in the sense that teachers guided by the curriculum focus only on teaching grammar in a deductive way rather than other aspects of the language. Moreover, he observes that the methods in use were described by the GPCE report as not being useful in teaching English since Libyan students "need a teacher that uses the methods of thinking, analysis and building of a full logical model for application" (GPCE, 2008: 26 quoted in Tantani (2012)). Apparently, the disconnection between the

traditional method of language teaching which is grammar-based and the modern approach to language acquisition has been the severe impediments to the mastery of the English language.

- **General attitude towards literature and reading**

Literature is largely seen as an elitist subject - meant for students endowed with high intelligence, and are socially privileged, who can afford the leisure of buying books and magazines, and even travel. Contrary to this popular myth, literature is a crucial subject and an essential requirement for the preparation of a learned man, 'it trains the mind to comprehend written material and exposes the learner to the sophisticated nature of human behavior, and why people behave the way they do (Ndawula 2014).' It is even more useful for EFL classroom, for it provides instances of language usage appropriate to varied social situations and communications (Duff & Maley 2008). However, the EFL classroom remains impoverished and devoid of practical language skills as a result of the negative attitude, especially when students are encouraged to think and believe that literature is only for the chosen few who are so intelligent and can understand the language of the text, not knowing that the text uses the same language taught in class. Moreover, the phobia of literature has its roots in the overall stigma attached to reading, the unmistakable absence of reading culture and the total reliance on oral edification of the masses have left an indelible mark on education itself. Surprisingly, it has raised questions about the significance of education, since some who denounce the need for it arguably take the statement 'life is a school' literally, killing the element of reading in its entirety.

- **Multilevel class**

Due to the increased opportunity in the English language in the job market, or that is what it seems, many students have been attracted to learning the subject. This upsurge has taken a heavy toll on the teaching process, in the sense that the creams of the crop who have invested a lot of their time to pursue a career in English language are mixed with those who are seeking their fortune, studying English for its job-prospect, and to obtain

a certificate regardless of grades. Thus creating an enormous disparity in students' levels in one class, which to a greater extent, is like putting the advanced and beginners together to take the same course. Tantani (2012) refers to this multilevel class as a challenge in the face of English language teaching in Libya. According to her, it ought to be addressed to enable teachers to give a recommended dosage, since the multilevel class influences the teacher's selection of materials or activities. This has resulted into the choice of abridged versions of literary works in advanced levels in higher institutions of learning on the pretext that all should be taken on board.

- Students' preparedness and motivation

Generally, there is indeed a marked low proficiency among students; it is also true that a good number of them are poorly motivated. Some are not even interested in learning or trying to read for several reasons, including the stigma mentioned earlier. In this case, the students, unable to fend for themselves, or even think for themselves heavily rely on spoon-feeding. For instance, a teacher in a novel class has to read the novel for students, give a synopsis of each chapter, explain the story line by line, which practices not only consume a lot of time, leaving very little for analysis of the work, but also kills and buries the subject altogether. This is not only a Libyan problem, but a regional one, as expressed by Farah (2009) with pinpoint accuracy in his study on the challenges of teaching English in the Arab World. This challenge, needless to say, negatively affects the study of literature since learning literature revolves around a sober mind for interpretation and analysis. Farah is deeply concerned as he noted that those teachers, on their part, do everything possible to engage and encourage the disengaged and discouraged students, and in return, they are always faced with a lukewarm response.

• Culture shock

Anthropologists use the term culture shock to refer to self-identity, which usually depends on culture to such a great extent that immersion in a very different culture—with which a person does not share common ways of life

or beliefs—can cause a feeling of confusion and disorientation (Bodley, 2009). Undeniably, culture shock is an issue when it comes to literature in the Libyan setting. The sudden exposure to unfamiliar culture in any given work of literature as experienced by students who are mostly from traditional and conservative backgrounds develops in them a sense of confusion and indifference, especially when issues to do with faith, tradition and specific ways of life are raised in a novel set in a relatively unfamiliar situation. It takes a lot of nerve to teach any given book, for instance, *The Scarlet Letter* without being apologetic. Scenes involving love affair or reference or inference to aspects of other religious faiths and strange cultures that abound in novels and drama are deemed offensive and embarrassing to students, which may cause a hullabaloo if not trickily tackled. Sometimes the best approach is to select international and not-cultural specific texts and to avoid thoroughly detailed analysis, and one may guess the result, the class of literature turns into a class of ‘translation’ in which a lot is lost in the process. Hence, the real pleasure of studying literary works vanishes according to Sarkar (2010), rendering the appreciation of literature incomplete.

• Teaching approach

According to Ndawula (2014), the primary step in teaching or learning literature is to begin with comprehension, without which no reader will gain interest in a story. He also cautions that any attempt to teach literary devices and criticisms before comprehension complicates the matter and kills interest and enjoyment. Besides, there are several ways that literature could be taught, which depend solely on the teacher and the goal of teaching the subject. Here below are the summation of model approaches to teaching literature, as Khatib et al (2011) presented.

- i. The critical literary approach focuses on the literalness of the text, and tackles such elements as plot, characterization, motivation, value, psychology, background. This is a widely used approach, appropriate for advanced students.

- ii. The stylistic approach or Language-based which focuses on literature as a 'text'. Suitable for language classes to explain parts of speech, figures of speech, and registers. In this approach, description and analysis of language are made before making interpreting the story.
- iii. Literature as content or culture focuses on literature as an ideal vehicle for presenting the language's cultural notions such as the history, literary theories, theory of genres, biography of the authors, geography, custom, politics, art and the like.
- iv. Literature as Personal Growth or Enrichment which focuses on approach of personal experience as a way to engage the students in literary works.

Moreover, one factor is constant in teaching literature per se, which is love. Love for literature can pave the way to the heart of the subject. Handy, the Black American Composer, once wrote, 'Love, as everyone should know, is a strange disease.' Strange because, in my opinion, it is highly contagious. Teachers with a love for literature might make it more accessible to their students than those who teach it only out of a sense of obligation.

Prospects:

Literature has the potential to initiate and effectuate change from within the classroom to the locality beyond. Provided it is well taught, learnt and studied, students will be introduced to intelligent reading joy. Besides, they will perfect and master the language, especially in an environment where English language usage is only limited to classroom activities. It will widen the students' world beyond the classroom walls to learn and experience things far out of their physical reach. In this way, they are introduced to the real world of language.

As long as literature is appropriately introduced and taught, reading culture will gradually develop, and with time it will become commonplace in the classroom and beyond. This will automatically profit the society at large and

will eventually positively affect its world view, hence creating change in people's perception of themselves and the world around them.

It is rightly believed that a good reader has imagination, memory, and some artistic sense. It is also true that a good reader is a good writer, and the opposite is correct. Therefore, developing the love for reading through teaching literature will subsequently pave the way for the creation of writers, reviewers and critics, who will breathe life in society's literary circle. In an attempt to address the question - how should literature be taught, An Sonjae (2014) posits that:

We need to stress the value of teaching young people to think because that (and certainly not business letter writing) is probably the only real justification for any Humanities program (for literature). (Through literature), we hope that our students may learn to ask good questions, search for acceptable and reasonable answers.

• Conclusion

Literature must be considered an essential subject in an EFL classroom and virtually a basic requirement for an educated person whose world is dominated by writings. This paper has discussed the relevance of teaching and learning literature, the challenges faced along the way, and finally highlighted the prospects of successfully integrating literature with the EFL classroom as an important component of the language. It stressed that EFL classrooms have more to gain and little to lose if it aptly incorporates literature in their curriculum to make students benefit from its reservoir of vocabularies, grammar and expressions to experience the English language. This is vital since EFL students may not have the space to practice what they acquire in class in language instruction.

However, it must be noted that for literature to take center stage, the intervention of the policy-makers in reviewing the English language curriculum and education system at large to suit the demands of the time is necessary. This, in addition to institutions working together with teachers to establish appropriate teaching methods and ways to motivate students and to

devise means to dismiss the general presumption and negative attitude towards the subject.

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