

Prose Fiction in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Literature is language in use and is generally seen to play a vital role in language teaching. Literary texts provide us with much aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure in that the writer often seeks to delineate their vision of human experience through a creative, emotive use of language. In essence literature serves to enhance the students' language competence. This paper examines the relationships between language and literature. This is demonstrated with several prose texts with a view to show their pedagogical relevance to students' language needs. In the conclusion, it is emphasized that the link between language and literature which had been ignored in the past should now be exploited for the development of students' performances in the target language.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in the use of literature in the language classroom. Many writers stress the benefits of using literary texts as the basis for imaginative, interactive and discussion activities. But the unfortunate thing about the assertion above is aptly expressed by Williams (1990:5);

The common ground between literature and language teaching has not been sufficiently exploited. The learner's mastery of the sound system can be enhanced through practice with the stress, rhythm, and rhyme in poetry, and with dialogue in drama. His use of vocabulary, idioms, and syntactic structure can be improved through exposure to the best model of contemporary prose, fiction and non-fiction.

Contemporary language teachers have not exploited the interrelationship between language and literature because of their erroneous impression that language teaching method is designed to promote the correct and appropriate use of language in a variety of situations through the practice of one kind of language skill or another. Their belief is that English should be taught using "authentic texts" for specific purposes. Even today most English language teachers' use "content-based instruction", which means primarily that texts used to teach language come from fields other than literature. Perhaps, language teachers are not mindful of the fact that literature can be linked for purpose of mutual reinforcement is necessary to stem the trend of poor performance in English in Nigeria today. This trend of unsatisfactory level of English language performance in the country, coupled with the increasing importance of English language in the nation's day-to-day activities has been noted with concern by scholars (Jubril & Freeman, 1984; Williams, 1990). With this situation, all those concerned with the education task need to find means of solving the problem. The need for an eclectic approach to the teaching of English has therefore been suggested by Williams (1990). Williams believes that alternative choices rather than rigid adherence to one particular method will go a long way in improving learners' performance in the language.

In a second language situation in which an integrative approach is to be adopted, the task of choosing a text is basically of crucial importance to the success of any attempt to utilize literature for acquisition and development of language skills. Several criteria must be taken into consideration during the selection of text to be read. Crucial among the criteria is readability of the text especially if prose fiction is the genre to be used as in this attempt. Included in the things to look for under readability are the nature of syllables of words in the text, familiarity of words, sentence length, grammatical complexity, multiple meaning of words and so on. This particular criterion would be used depending on the level of attainment of the learners. Another important consideration is the learner's background. The content of the text should reflect the culture and experience of the learners. This will enable the learners to bring their experience to bear on what is to be read and consequently be able to respond actively to the text in class. In addition, the literary quality of the text should be taken into consideration. By this, we mean that the text selected should have literary qualities such as the use of figure of speech, folklores of the people, and all other element of literary work.

Prose Fiction in the Language Classroom

Literature (poetry, drama and prose) essentially focuses on human experience expressed in language but the obvious link between language and literature is the fact that whatever experience or idea that is expressed in first or second language. Literature is expressed in what Williams (1990) described as "exemplary language". This gives literature the quality or practical value of enabling the learner to see language in its best use, learn about it as well as use it. To offer learner this opportunity, literature teachers should not ignore the link between the two subjects. They should be mindful of the fact that prose fiction, like poetry or drama, is an avenue that provides examples and models of language in a variety of situations. Care, however, should be taken in the selection of texts to be used for the teaching of language as not all prose texts have much to offer.

Demonstrations

Attempt shall now be made in how prose can be brought into the teaching of fluency, summary writing, vocabulary development, punctuation, comprehension, adjectives, figurative use of language, etc. Passages (texts) shall be carefully selected from familiar texts like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Okpewho's *The Last Duty* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*.

Demonstration I: A text from Okpewho's *The Last Duty* – pp 4-5

The text is extracted as shown below and copies made available to learners:

Every town must have a few people whose name lend respect to the community. They should be the town's foremost citizens, men of some distinction. It isn't that these are the first men to be called to arms when a fight ensues between their towns and another – no that's a thing of past. There are occasions when credit or endowments are to be bestowed on towns, when what a town gets depends who its foremost citizens are, so that when the name of such and such a place comes up, it is generally asked, "who is there"? A town is worth nothing if it has no names on whom its very credit hangs. I am one of those very few names that mean anything here in Urukpe. Everybody knows that – or should. When the federal troops liberated this town over three years ago, the first thing that the commander wanted to know was who the elders were. Of course my name could not have been left out after that of the Ototo of Urukpe, our big chief. When the present commander took over about two years ago, he did the same thing. They were both certain that the success of their commands here depended on their being accepted by people like me without whom this town would be nothing. I am a big man, and there is no question about it even if I am a big man, and there is no question about it even if I have to say so over and over. I have made my mark in the rubber business in this town and in this State. This town has people like me to thank for whatever notice it has achieved today, and if any army commander knows what's good for him and for his army, he had better get well attached to me. Recognition must be given where it is due, and that goes without any question if therefore anything happens to people like me that might detract from the position in which we are held; no sacrifice should be too great from any body in this town to ensure that we keep our place, that we maintain our position. Every citizen has to pay, and even the army commander has to recognize that he should do something to ensure that the very foundation on which his success here rests is not undermined. Great names are rare, and must not be wasted that is why I have not hesitated to recommend a citizen here for detention on charges of collaboration with the rebels, and then suborned another citizen to draw up the details of the indictment. For I felt that Mukoro Oshevire stood in my way. And that again is why I have not hesitated to seek carnal pleasure with his forlorn wife.

The above can be used for various language activities by the literature teacher.

- a. Students are asked to read the extract carefully and to decide what the attitude of the speaker is
- b. Group discussion of the character's attitude or opinion of himself is made
- c. Teacher and the class examine the extract to pick out ways of expressing attitude.
- d. Teacher tells the students to read the extract again and then write an essay about the character's opinion about himself.
- e. The teacher tells the students to write about their attitudes to the character etc.

Activities (a-c) involve reading and discussion; (d-e) reading leading to writing.

Questions may be formed to test students' understanding of the extract and some words may be underlined and students asked to substitute for them in the passage. Such words may include: *foremost*, *distinction*, *bestowed*, *liberated*, *detracts*, *rare*, *collaboration*, *suborned*, etc. While doing this, the teachers may also seize the opportunity to teach the use of the dictionary.

Demonstration II: An extract from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – p. 1

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbiano. He was called the cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights. The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end, Okonkwo threw the cat. That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush fire in the harmathan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk

on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father.

The extract above is chosen because it presents learners with a particular aspect/skill of written English. This is similar to Tomlinson's modeling approach. The extract demonstrates vivid description of a popular cultural even common in the setting of the novel from which the extract is taken.

Activities

- a. Students are given copies of the extract and are asked to read it.
- b. They are asked to say whether they engage in similar activities in their own areas of the country. Students are given the opportunity to say how wrestling is organized in their own areas.
- c. Teacher together with students discuss Achebe's style of description, how he has created a vivid image of the contest in the mind of readers.
- d. Students are asked to write a description of the duel between Amalinze the cat and Okonkwo in their own words. They should avoid copying the extract.
- e. Adjective used aptly for the description of people and incidents in the extract could be pulled out and taught. Examples include: young/old, great, fiercest, wily, tall and huge, bushy, wide, severe, slight, unsuccessful. Some of the adjectives could be used to teach antonyms young/old. Some others could be used to teach comparison of adjectives: great, fiercest, tall, wide, young, old, etc.

<i>great,</i>	<i>greater,</i>	<i>greatest</i>
<i>fierce,</i>	<i>fiercer,</i>	<i>fiercest</i>
<i>wide,</i>	<i>wider,</i>	<i>widest</i>
<i>young,</i>	<i>younger,</i>	<i>youngest</i>
<i>old,</i>	<i>older,</i>	<i>oldest</i> etc

- f. Use of figure of speech could be taught with the extract: metaphor (Amalinze the cat, walk on springs, etc); simile (... as slippery as a fish..... grown like a bush fire) and personification (... drums beat and the flutes sang...).
- g. Students are then asked to write a description of wrestling contest in their own areas making use of relevant adjectives to make their description vivid.

The type of approaches stated above are within the reach of senior secondary students, write-ups can be compared with the original and the differences in relation to spellings, punctuation, forms of words, can be used as basis for the discussion of students' problems in oral or spoken English.

Conclusion

The paper has tried to argue that despite the fact that literature deals with matters of human concern, it could also be used to teach students about the second language and its uses. The paper does not advocate that the essence of literary studies, which is shared experimental value between the creative artist and the reader, should be relegated for language teaching but the link between language and literature which had been ignored in the past should now be exploited for the development of students' performance in the target language.

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