

An Integrated Approach to Using Literature to Learn Language (L3): A Guideline for Language Teachers

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Abstract

Although formerly a cornerstone of language learning, literature became less popular with the rise of communicative language teaching, which prioritizes interaction. However, engaging stories remain a powerful motivator, recognized as a key factor in successful language development. Literature serves as a valuable tool for both teachers and learners. Educators can use literary texts to enhance all four language skills, comprehension, and language awareness, while students benefit from enriched vocabulary, grammar development, and cultural exposure. Additionally, literature fosters critical thinking by immersing learners in diverse perspectives. This paper advocates for a renewed appreciation of literature in language education through an integrated approach. It outlines key components of this method, discussing essential concepts such as translation, simplification, metalanguage and copyright concerns. The study also explores limitations, suggests areas for further research, and considers implications for teacher training. Ultimately, it envisions a future where literature regains its role as a highly effective resource for language learning.

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Introduction

Once the mainstay of language teaching methodology (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 1986, 2014), the use of literature to learn language lost its appeal with the advent of communicative language teaching with its emphasis on interpersonal interaction (e.g., Littlewood, 1981, 2012; Widdowson, 1978). And yet the sheer interest value of a good story remains an excellent motivator, recognised as perhaps the major factor influencing language learning (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). It is for this reason that literature can be such a powerful learning tool.

I have been working in the field of English Language Teacher Education for some time now, and I have found myself increasingly interested in the potential of literature to promote successful language learning. From a teacher's perspective, a literary piece can be used to develop all four skills, as well as comprehension and language awareness. From the learner's perspective, a literary piece can be an entertaining way to develop vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and skills. A major additional benefit is that a story encapsulates the target culture, and it provides an opportunity to develop critical thinking.

The aim of this paper is to help promote the rediscovery of the potential value of literature in language teaching and learning using an integrated approach. The paper first explains the elements involved in such an approach with reference to the key literature involved, before going on to discuss related issues (definition, translation, simplification, metalanguage, copyright). Limitations and suggestions for further research are then suggested, followed by implications for teacher education. The conclusion looks to the future for the use of literature as a tool for teaching and learning language, followed by a list of related literature and an appendix including an example of an integrated lesson which teachers are free to use either as it is or adapted, or to use as a model for creating their own literature-based lessons appropriate for their own students and contexts.

The Integrated Approach

Although language teaching is often segmented according to sections such as skills, vocabulary, grammar, and so on, a lesson based on a literary piece can integrate numerous language elements, thereby presenting a much more real-life view of the way language is actually used. These elements include:

- Literature is a rich source of **vocabulary** (including idioms and connotations), essential for expressing meaning (e.g., Nation, 2013).
- Attention can also be drawn to the **pronunciation** of the lexical items included in the story and models can also be provided. For some reason, although clear and intelligible pronunciation is recognised as important (e.g., Sardegna, 2020), teachers often underemphasise it in the language classroom. A good story can provide a good opportunity to foreground the sound of the language.
- A literary piece models **grammar** in use. Although with the advent of communicative approaches, the importance of grammar tended to be downplayed, its importance has more recently been re-established (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2003).
- Reading skills will also be developed if the literary input is presented in written form. Given the importance of the ability to read, whether for academic

pursuits or just in everyday life, it is impossible to overlook the value of reading skills development (e.g., Krashen, 2004; Tin, 2020).

- Equally important is the ability to understand what is read. Therefore, the potential for using a literary piece to develop **comprehension** adds still further to its usefulness. As Mendoza-Pinargote and Reyes-Meza (2022, p.124) put it: “Reading comprehension is one of the basic skills that everyone must master”. An important detail to consider is that comprehension questions should not just include details which are explicitly given in the story, but they should require some degree of inferencing, that is, thinking through what is implied rather than directly stated. This is especially important as students become more mature and language proficiency develops.
- Students can also use what they read as a model for their own **writing** (e.g., Hyland, 2016). Although the almost universal adoption of keyboard technology (whether on a laptop or phone) has tended to make writing with traditional pen and paper almost obsolete, people still need to be able to write in one mode or another in order to convey essential messages.
- If the input is presented aurally, it will help to develop **listening** skills (e.g., Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This is clearly important because much of the information we receive, whether in daily life or in academia, comes via an aural mode, so poor listening skills are clearly going to be a handicap.
- For **speaking** (e.g., Goh & Sabnani, 2020), learners can use the input they have read or heard to create their own output. The ability to express oneself orally is another essential skill that can be developed using a literary piece.
- Another important benefit of literature is that, in addition to the language, it presents the culture in which the language is embedded (e.g., Ghosn, 2002). To some degree, we are all “culture bound” (Valdes, 1986), but a story makes culture available to learners.
- Yet another important benefit is the potential to develop **critical thinking**, which, according to Negoescu (2023, p.303), “fosters strong-minded and open-minded people with unbiased judgment abilities”. Stories such as *Lord of the Flies*, *Rebel without a Cause*, *The Happy Prince*, and many others can be used to arouse students’ awareness of critical issues and to stimulate reflection and discussion.

An example of a lesson using this approach can be seen in the Appendix

Discussion of Issues with the L3 Approach

Perhaps the first question which needs to be asked is: **What is literature?** Although the answer to this question might seem at first to be obvious, in fact there has been much controversy surrounding it. The term derives from two sources: firstly from the

Latin *literare* which means to write, and secondly from French *lire*, meaning to read. These two derivations might suggest that the term *literature* refers to anything which has been written and which can, therefore, be read. This might therefore apply all the way from classic novels, to newspapers, to shopping lists, to graffiti, and everything in between. Some, however, prefer to use a narrower definition, including only “good” literature, such as the novels of Charles Dickens or the poetry of John Keats. Ultimately, in the absence of consensus on this issue, it is up to teachers to make the decision of what to include in their own classes based on the students, the context and their own personal preferences.

Another controversial issue relates to **translation**. English literature has borrowed from multiple other sources, such as Danish (e.g. the stories of Hans Christian Andersen), German (e.g. the stories by the Brothers Grimm) and Russian (e.g. *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy) among many others. But, of course, there is always something lost in translation, and some argue that it is important to retain the authenticity of the original. The fact remains, however, that many delightful stories would not be as well known internationally without translation. This is another issue which requires teacher judgement.

A similar argument is often put forward in relation to **simplification**. These days, many well-known publishers have produced simplified versions of stories. On the one hand, some argue that only original versions should be used, while others counter argue that although the originals are undoubtedly best, they are often too difficult for those with still-developing language knowledge, and that, therefore, a simplified version is better than nothing. Again, teacher judgement is required here.

Metalinguage is another point of controversy. Some question whether knowledge of metalinguistic terms such as protagonist, anonymous, posthumous or pseudonym is necessary and they argue that only knowledge and appreciation of the story are required. Yet again, the answer may depend on factors such as student interest and goals, curriculum demands, and teacher preference.

And, of course, there is the thorny issue of **copyright**, designed to protect intellectual property rights. Naturally, we would not question the rights of individuals to property such as their house or their furniture, but for some reason an individual’s right to intellectual property, such as an article or a book, often does command the same level of respect, in spite of the fact that these artefacts represent many hours of work and are as much the author’s “property” as anything else s/he might own.

Limitations and Suggestions for Ongoing Research

Since the book *Using Literature to Learn and Teach Language: The L3 Approach* (Griffiths, 2024) is still very recent at the time of writing, a limitation is that very little actual research has been done regarding the effectiveness of this approach. Questions which need to be investigated include:

1. Does it work for teachers?
2. Does it work for students?
3. Some students are very reluctant readers. How can student reluctance be overcome?
4. Is the L3 approach more or less effective according to context? (e.g. EFL, ESL, Europe/Asia, etc.)
5. What changes/adaptations would improve its usefulness?
6. How does the L3 approach influence learners' linguistic, literary, and cultural competence in diverse educational settings?
7. What impact does the L3 approach have on students' motivation and engagement in language learning?
8. How does the L3 approach affect the development of critical thinking and interpretive skills among language learners?
9. What differences exist between outcomes when the L3 approach is applied in contexts where the target language is spoken versus contexts where it is not?
10. What professional development is needed to prepare language teachers to implement the L3 approach effectively?
11. How does the use of culturally rich literary texts in the L3 approach shape learners' intercultural awareness and identity?

Potentially useful methodologies for researching these questions might include:

1. Questionnaires. These could employ either open-ended or closed questions or a mixture of both. If combined with a criterion measure such as class grade or GPA, results could be entered into a statistics programme to provide correlations.
2. Interviews. This essentially qualitative method could be usefully employed to probe individual perspectives in more detail than is usually possible with a questionnaire.
3. Experimental. Though it can be difficult to set up an experimental design using pre and post-tests with control and experimental groups, an experiment can provide interesting data about the effectiveness of an intervention compared with alternative teaching methodologies.

Implications for Teacher Education

If literature is ever to be reintegrated back into language syllabi and curricula, the way it once used to be, it needs to start with teacher education. To facilitate the process, a book such as the one by Griffiths (2024) can be used to provide pre-service teachers with a bank of literary knowledge on which they can draw as appropriate when they are in their own classrooms. The book also discusses the principles and issues related to the use of literature to learn language, since it is important that teachers understand the controversies surrounding the practice so that they can make informed decisions regarding their own teaching contexts. In addition, the book provides multiple examples of lessons constructed from literary pieces using an integrated approach which they can use as models to use or adapt to their own lessons (see an example in the Appendix).

Conclusion

Using literature to learn language has the potential to offer an interesting, entertaining and motivating way to develop language knowledge and skills, whether used as supplementary material to provide variety in a largely textbook-based course, or, even as the main course text. However, at this point in time, since the use of literature for this purpose is still relatively newly re-discovered, it is important that research is carried out to determine the most effective ways of utilising this potentially powerful learning tool.

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Appendix: Sample lesson plan using the L3 integrated approach

Adapted from *Using Literature to Learn and Teach Language* (Griffiths, 2024)

NOVELLA: THE PEARL - John Steinbeck

Speaking: discuss these questions with your partner or group

This story is sometimes regarded as a parable about how wealth does not make us happy. Do you agree?

What do you know about the Great Depression? Exchange what you know with your partner/s. Please check on the internet if you need to

Listening: Listen to the text about John Steinbeck and say if the following statements are true or false

1. John Steinbeck was English
2. He was born in the 19th century
3. Many of his stories are set in the Great Depression
4. He became a journalist
5. His stories often dealt with social criticism
6. He received the Nobel Prize for literature
7. He died at the age of 60

Vocabulary:

There are three naturally occurring creatures mentioned in the story:

1. Scorpion
2. Oyster
3. Coyote

Please describe them (you can check the internet if you don't already know). Do you have these creatures in your own environment? What do they tell us about the setting of the story? Why are they important in the story?

Explain the meaning of the following words and write them in sentences which clearly demonstrate the meaning.

	WORD	MEANING
1	Valuable	
2	Thief	
3	Cheat	
4	Dawn	
5	Dusk	
6	Machete	
7	Random	

Scan the story, underline any words that you personally do not know, and check the meaning.

Pronunciation: How are the words in the vocabulary list pronounced?

he found a **valuable** pearl in the **water**

the doctor **visited** the sick **woman**

The distinction between the "v" and the "w" sounds in English can be problematic for students whose own languages do not have both sounds. Check that you can say the above phrases correctly and practise them if necessary. Practise these minimal pairs:

vet/wet vine/wine veil/whale

Reading: Skim the story looking for the following information:

1. What is the baby's name?
2. What is Kino's wife's name?
3. What does Kino use to kill the trackers?

Now read the story carefully

Comprehension: Answer the following questions about the story

1. What was Kino's occupation?
2. Why did Kino call the doctor?
3. Why does the doctor refuse to come?
4. Why does Kino decide to go to the city?
5. Why does Juana try to throw the pearl back into the sea?
6. What happens to Kino's boat?
7. What happened to his house?
8. Why do you think they travel at night?
9. How does the baby die?
10. What happens to the pearl in the end?

Grammar: Put the correct form of the words from the story into the spaces

1. I wish you _____ (happy)
2. Snakes can be very _____ (poison)
3. Many people have a _____ of darkness (afraid)
4. He _____ a lot of money (steal)
5. We had some _____ news (better)
6. In many places in the world _____ is a big problem (poor)
7. Although it is pretty, it has no _____ (valuable)
8. The criminals specialize in _____ cars (steal)
9. Everybody believed he was the _____ (murder)
10. The _____ of Radium led to the development of X-rays (discovers)

Writing:

What would you do if you found something valuable or you won or inherited a lot of money?
What would you spend it on?
Do you think it would make you happy?

THE PEARL - John Steinbeck (reading text)

Kino is a pearl fisherman, and he lives a simple life with his wife, Juana, and his baby Coyotito. They are happy, but one night, Coyotito is stung by a scorpion. Since he is afraid the scorpion's poison might kill his son, Kino calls the doctor, but the doctor refuses to treat the boy because Kino is poor and does not have enough money.

Hoping to find a pearl he can sell to pay the doctor, Kino dives for oysters and finds a very large and valuable pearl. When he hears the news, the doctor visits, and although Coyotito already seems to be better, the doctor gives him some medicine.

That night, a thief tries to steal the pearl, but Kino drives him away. The next day, he goes to sell his pearl, but the dealers try to cheat him. Kino decides to go to the city to try to get a better price.

Later that night, Juana takes the pearl and tries to throw it into the sea, since it already seems to be attracting bad luck. But Kino finds her and beats her, which is very uncharacteristic behaviour for him. A group of men attacks them, and Kino kills one of them with his knife. Even though the killing was in self-defence, they decide they have to leave, since he is likely to be accused of murder. They want to sail to the city, but they find that Kino's boat has been damaged, and their house is set on fire.

Kino and Juana travel through the night and when dawn approaches, they find a cave to hide in during the day. But at dusk a group of trackers who have been following the family arrive and camp by the pool below them.

Leaving Juana and Coyotito hiding in the cave, Kino goes down to the pool with his machete. As Kino approaches the trackers, they hear a child's cry. They assume it is just a baby coyote and shoot in its general direction.

Kino attacks and kills all three of them, but when he gets back to the cave, he discovers that the random bullet has hit and killed Coyotito. Heartbroken, Kino hurls the pearl back into the ocean, and the story ends with Kino facing an uncertain future.

Listening text

John Steinbeck was an American author born in 1902. He was influenced by the conditions of the Great Depression, and served as a journalist in the Second World War. His stories often involved social criticism, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. Other well-known literary works include *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. He died of heart disease in 1962

For discussion/reflection/extension/critical thinking:

What do you think is the message of the story? Do you agree?

What do you think will happen to Kino and Juana now?

For practice (for pre-service or in-service teachers): Please choose a different novella and use it to construct an integrated lesson of your own.