

Integrating literature into EFL classes: the case of bringing short stories into Iranian EFL classes to see its impact on the EFL learners' language learning motivation and their attitudes towards English literature

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Abstract

Short stories act as catalysts for merging English and life. They fully strike the balance of engaging, challenging, and fulfilling for language learners. Therefore, the current study built up its aim on how exposing students to short stories affects 1) their motivation in foreign language learning and 2) their attitude towards English literature. A sample of 100 intermediate level English students was examined during a four-month period of treatment in which they were exposed to 15 short stories during their lessons. Their attitude and level of motivation was gained through two questionnaires called Attitude Questionnaire and Motivation Questionnaire at the beginning of the study. After a 4-month treatment the same questionnaires were filled out by the students for the second time. The comparison between the results of the pre and post tests revealed a significant difference between the students' performances before and after being exposed to the short stories.

Keywords: *Literature, Short stories, Motivation*

Introduction

Repeated observations have proved the fact that language learning has always been considered as a difficult process for many EFL learners, and that is why they normally postpone it. Therefore, there is a high demand for a challenging and enjoyable atmosphere cultivated by the teacher, so that via touching the learners' motivation and attitude towards language learning, the teacher can

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easily pave the way for the learners to go through the process of language learning smoothly. Arguably, only three conditions are absolutely essential for language learning to occur, in other words, without any one of these three conditions it is fairly clear that language learning will *not* occur (see e.g. Spolsky, 1998, Ellis, 1995). These are: “exposure” to the target language, “motivation” to learn the language, and opportunities to “use” the language. Telling learners stories in English, which is a way to increase the ‘exposure’, can be motivating and can initiate a learning sequence leading to meaningful use of language.

Since the process of teaching is moving towards having more student-centered classes than teacher-centered, student role can be of equal importance with the teacher’s. As a result, students’ speaking skill, as normally displayed in their interactions and participation in discussions, plays a leading role in running the class discussions. However, this speaking does not happen unless they own a positive attitude and enough of motivation to start to talk.

In terms of language learning, learners are adept at picking up chunks of language, and stories often include such chunks repeatedly. Listening repeatedly to favorite stories is a typical beloved activity for learners, and so asking them to listen again to a story gives an appropriate learner-centered purpose to the activity. Moreover, the repetition of favorite stories can allow for greater class involvement as well as the kind of repeated exposure which can allow more ‘picking up’ of language.

Why Story Telling

Here, the researchers have come up with some of the reasons made them integrate story telling in their language teaching process:

- Story provides the students with a meaningful context so that the students will learn in a Meaning, Use and Form sequence
- Story stimulates the learners’ imagination
- Story provides exposure to language in chunks. Therefore, the learners pick up the chunks of new language
- Listening to or reading a story is a naturally a more pleasant activity than reading course books and doing exercises. As a result, it can bring about higher level of motivation in the learners
- Stories contain natural repetition of key vocabulary and structures, so that it can make the new vocabulary items and grammatical structures stick in the learners’ minds through repetition

Review of literature

- *Use of literature in EFL classes*

Literature is considered as a promising tool for language learning purposes. Scholars in the field have proposed various advantages for the use of literature in EFL/ESL classes. What follows is a summary of what can be considered as the merits of literature in EFL/ESL.

- *Authenticity*

Literature is inherently authentic and provides authentic input for language learning (Ghosn, 2002; Shrestha, 2008). According to Maley (1989a) literature deals with non-trivial things which are personally relevant to them. Authenticity is a criterion considered highly essential in the current literature in EFL/ESL which is naturally existent in literary texts. Authenticity can especially be envisaged in drama and novel. In drama we have conversations, expressions of feelings, functional phrases, and contextualized expressions. Similarly in novels, descriptive writing along with other types of writing adds to the imaginative nature of human and hence language is easily etched on our mind.

- *Motivation*

Literary texts are very motivating due to its authenticity and the meaningful context it provides (Ghosn, 2002, Van, 2009). Literature deals with things which are interesting in nature and includes little if any uninteresting things (Maley, 1989a). Motivation is one of the elements which can drive the learners to go ahead. Motivation is especially achieved when students are exposed to what they really enjoy. Experience shows that students are highly motivated when they are exposed to literary texts for language learning purposes.

- *Cultural/Intercultural Awareness and Globalization*

Literature promotes cultural and intercultural awareness (Van, 2009) especially in the era of globalization (Tayebipour, 2009). In the era of globalization, there is a growing concern of universally shared needs and wants rather than individual needs. Since literature deals with universal concepts (Maley, 1989a), there is an urge to grab on literature as an input source for flourishing language learners' competence. Globalization cries for joining hands not only in economy, politics, and sociology but also in language-related fields such as ELT. According to Maley (1989a), literature deals with universal concepts such as love, hatred, death, nature, etc that are common to all languages and cultures. The similarities and even differences between cultures and languages can further our understanding of the whole world.

- *Intensive/Extensive Reading Practice*

Literature is good for extensive and intensive reading. Novels are good for extensive reading purposes. Students can be given a weak just to go through a novel without extensive use of dictionary. Such a practice will double up their reading speed and also encourage meaning guessing in reading. Subsequently learners learn how to read a lot in a short period of time. One of the authors of this paper enjoyed his own experience of reading 'The Adventures of Huck Finn' in a week or so which was a thrilling and helpful know-how for extensive reading.

- *Sociolinguistic/Pragmatic Knowledge*

Due to its authenticity, literature can develop sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge as manifested in communicative competence models (McKay, 2001). Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic competence are two of the main components of the communicative competence models. Hence, special attention is needed to be directed to this component. Literature due to its authenticity is equipped with sociolinguistic and pragmatic information. These two features are more related to 'appropriateness' in language which can be found only in contextualized language such as literary texts especially dramas and plays.

- *Grammar and Vocabulary Knowledge*

Maley (1989a) says that literature deals with a potpourri of language types and varieties from slang to formal and various subject matters. Also Arthur (1968) believes that syntactic knowledge and vocabulary enrichment can be accelerated through literary texts. In other words, literature involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose (Van, 2009). Though poetry is usually criticized for its complex and far-fetched syntactic structures, it can simultaneously be a good source for practicing grammatical structures. One such drill is asking the students to change the complex structures in a poem to the Standard English structure. Literary texts are the major sources where complex structures such as dangling structure, inversion, subjunctives, etc occur.

- *Language Skills*

Quite in line with the principles of CLT (Van, 2009), literature is rich with innumerable authentic tokens of language for the development of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000, Crain, 1993, Erkaya, 2005, Fitzgerald, 1993, Knight, 1993, Latosi-Sawin, 1993, Nasr, 2001, Spack, 1985, Stern, 2001, Vandrick, 1996).

For writing purposes, literature shows to set a good ground for writing practice. Having the learners complete a poem or short story in cloze form is very encouraging. Also we can have the students write the end of a story in their own words or narrate a story from the point of view of another character in a short story, novella, or novel. Other similar creative activities can be developed for writing practice.

For speaking purposes, the events in a poem, novel, or short story can be associated with the learners' own experience in real life. Such a practice paves the way for hot topics for discussion in language classes. Having the students freely reflect on the events and having them critically comment is also facilitative for advancing speaking proficiency.

For listening purposes, the learners can be exposed to the audio versions of the poems, short stories, or novels. Also the musical elements in poetry stimulate the learners' desire for approximating their speaking patterns to the native speaker norms by adhering to the principles of rhythm, rhyme, and intonation.

For reading purposes, as above-mentioned, novel and poetry can provide good opportunities for extensive and intensive reading. Also it is good for practicing reading subskills including skimming, scanning, and finding the main ideas. Reading in literature is a combination of reading for enjoyment and reading for information. Therefore, it bridges the lacks in non-literary texts. In fact, literature is not only facilitative for language learning purposes in general but it can also accelerate language learning in content-based instruction (Shang, 2006).

- *Emotional Intelligence (EQ)*

Reading literary texts foster emotional intelligence (Ghosn, 2002). Daniel Goleman is the pioneer in EQ. He believes that IQ and even multiple intelligences did not cater for this aspect of human intelligence. EQ is specifically related to human ability to control and manage their emotions and feelings in difficult situations. An example for EFL/ESL context is how far EFL/ESL learners are able to control their anxiety when it comes to taking high-stake tests. Hence; dealing with affection, feeling and emotion, Literature is a good source for nurturing our EQ.

- *Critical Thinking*

Literature is a good medium for critical thinking enhancement among language learners (Gajdusek & van Dommelen, 1993, Ghosn, 2002, Van, 2009). Ghosn (2002) maintains that literature can bring about changes in the attitudes of the learners. According to Langer (1997), literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Literature can open "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607). Literature among other text types is fertile with ideas to critically look at. Here the role of the teacher is very significant in developing such higher-order thinking skills. Today, critical thinking is the cornerstone of education particularly at advanced levels of education. Critical thinking prepares us not to take things for granted and to attempt to unravel the hidden agenda of texts. Critical thinking informs Critical Discourse Analysis in Language Studies and similar fields in philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, and law.

- *Short stories*

The types of literary texts that can be studied inside and outside the ELT classroom are really vast, and among them short stories are great catalysts for bringing English to life. Many ESL students have the vocabulary and grammar know-how but find real-life language usage challenging. Short stories for your students will open their creative English minds as they enjoy an exciting or funny short story. Employing short stories is also a wonderful break from the formal, more traditional lesson plan or continual textbook learning style. They also get the whole class involved in an exciting way. Gathering your students in a circle and reading a short story offers essential communication they may not find in more traditional, ESL desk learning.

- Some Studies about the Use of Literature in Language Classes and Students' Attitudes Towards Literature

By reviewing the related literature of the present study, it is important to clear the number of studies related to the use of literature in language classes and student' attitudes towards it with the effects of literature on vocabulary learning. As far as we searched, studies and theses conducted in the world will be given in the following section:

In a study conducted by Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Jusoff (2009), the attitudes of students' towards the literary texts and what kind of texts they prefer to read were investigated in Malaysia. As conclusion of their study, it was found that short story was the most popular type of literary text among students but poem and novel were not popular among students. In a study conducted by Phat (2013), students' opinions towards literature were searched with participation of 234 at a university in Ho Chi Minh City. It was found that most of the students approved the benefits of literature in speaking skill. 154 (65,81%) students agreed that literature improved their speaking - communication- skills.

In a study conducted by Akyel and Yalçın (1990), the specific contributions of drama, poetry and prose fiction in developing EFL senior high school students' competence in language and literature was researched. The study revealed that students regarded "novel" as the most effective way in developing language skills and cultural awareness, and "drama" as the most effective way of developing oral expressions. In another study carried out by Özkeçeci (1994), the relationships

between the study of the literature and language teaching in university preparatory classes was investigated. At the end of the study, a significant difference was found between the opinions of the students and instructors which originated from the difference in their departments they studied. In a study conducted by Gebenliler (2006), the opinions of university preparatory students on the use of drama techniques and determination of their level of language use and self-confidence were investigated. The results pointed that the students' level of language use and self-confidence levels increased positively after the use drama scripts. Similarly, the views of EFL students towards literature in ELT department was investigated by Gölğeli (2006). The results of the Gölğeli's study revealed that there was a correlation between students' perceived language proficiency levels, personal taste in reading, reading motivations and views about literature classes in English. Likewise, a study conducted by Doğrul (2007) researched the role of children's literature -specially short stories- on success in vocabulary teaching. The results of the study showed that using stories from children literature had positive effects on developing success in language teaching. Another study which was conducted by Demircioğlu (2008) searched private primary school students' attitudes towards learning new vocabulary items through drama. The results of Demircioğlu's study indicated that young learners' communication skills improved, their long-term retention of vocabulary promoted and they got motivated via drama integrated lesson plans. Similarly, a study conducted by Ziya (2009), searched the vocabulary competence of 5th grade students by integrating different genres of literature. At the end of the study it was found that integration of literature into English courses had a positive effect on the enhancement of vocabulary competence. Likewise, Köylüoğlu (2010) investigated the use of drama techniques in grammar teaching. Throughout the study, it was researched the teaching of grammar (simple present tense) via drama among high school students. The results of Köylüoğlu's study revealed that teaching grammar with drama led to better results than teaching with traditional methods.

Methodology

Participants

A sample of 120 intermediate English students was recruited from Safir English Language Academy of Tehran, Iran. They were all female native Farsi speakers whose age ranged from 18 to 30. In order to ensure the homogeneous entry behavior of the participants in terms of proficiency, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), with reasonable measures of validity and reliability, was used to screen the participants. The participants who scored lower than 50% of the total possible score (n-20), were eliminated from the study. Therefore, the study went on with 100 participants.

Materials and Instrument

The materials used in this study were a) student's course book, b) work book, and c) story books. The participants were taught the third level of English Result books (Hancock and McDonald, 2008) as their main source. 6 units of the book were taught to them by the teacher, along with 15 short stories with various tangible topics for discussions, as well as work book exercises to check

understanding and review. The instrument of the study was two types of questionnaires, namely Attitude Questionnaire and Motivation Questionnaire to check students' attitude and level of motivation towards EFL learning.

Procedure

The study was carried out around the period of four months. 120 female students took part in the study. Before starting the research, a placement test (OPT) was administered to the participants, containing a set of questions in order to make sure about their homogeneity. The study began with 100 participants in 5 different classes, with the same teacher, teaching method and materials. The two questionnaires were administered to the participants prior to the study in order to gain their attitude towards literature as well as their level of motivation to EFL learning. The data was collected and kept till the end of the study. The classes were supposed to be student centered, that is, the course book was taught inductively through discovery learning, brainstorming, contextualization, and personalization in order to touch students' emotion and feelings. Besides, after the first week, the students started to get familiar with their story books, one story per week. During the first 3 weeks, the stories were introduced in the class, by the teacher, in order to pave the way for the student to gradually read them independently. The students were provided with the setting, theme, characters, plus the gist of the story through these three weeks. They were then assigned to read them at home and make a summary on them the following session. After three weeks, the students were supposed to run the story parts themselves, that is, to start their stories without any information from the teacher, read it at home, and then hold a class discussion on the stories with the teacher as a mentor. After 16 weeks of treatment, that is exposing the learners to short stories, the same questionnaires were given to them for the second time. The data was collected and compared with the one collected before the treatment.

Results

An analysis of Chi-square was run to investigate the effect of using short stories on the motivation of the Iranian learners to learn the second language better. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of the Pre-test and Post-test of Motivation Questionnaire

			CHOICES					Total
			Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
MOTIVATION	Pre-test	Count	101	126	33	88	72	420
		%	24.0%	30.0%	7.9%	21.0%	17.1%	100.0%
		Std. Residual	4.5	7.0	-.7	-.1	-7.0	
	Post-test	Count	29	10	41	90	250	420
		%	6.9%	2.4%	9.8%	21.4%	59.5%	100.0%
		Std. Residual	-4.5	-7.0	.7	.1	7.0	
Total	Count	130	136	74	178	322	840	
	%	15.5%	16.2%	8.8%	21.2%	38.3%	100.0%	

Table 1 displays the frequencies, percentages and standardized residuals for the 100 students' responses to 21 items of the motivation questionnaire. While the frequencies and percentages are parts of the descriptive statistics, the Std. Residual is a standardized index based on which statistical inferences can be made (Field 2009). Any Std. Residual values beyond the ranges of +/- 1.96 indicate significant differences. Thus it can be concluded that the students showed a more disagreement on the pretest questionnaire; i.e. they significantly selected the “strongly disagree” (Std. Residual = 4.5) and “disagree” (Std. Residual = 7). While a reverse pattern happened on the posttest. They significantly selected “strongly agree” (Std. Residual = 7).

The results of the Chi-square ($X(4) = 238.10, P = .000 < .05$) indicate that the above-mentioned differences are statistically significant. Thus bringing short stories to the EFL classes does have a significant effect on motivating Iranian young learners. Using English short stories has therefore significantly motivated students to learn the second language better.

Table 2: Chi-Square of Pre-test and Post-test of Motivation

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	238.103 ^a	4	.000
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 37.00.			

In this study, it is compared whether there is a difference between before the treatment and after it in the students' attitudes towards literature integrated lessons. Due to this reason a 10 items attitude questionnaire with 5 point Likert Scale is given the participants and asked them to rate their views. To investigate the differences in participants' attitudes The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test is used. Students' attitudes towards literature integrated lessons are shown in table 3.

Table 3. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for the Attitude Questionnaire

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Post test - pre test	Negative Ranks	12	7,54	90,50
	Positive Ranks	2	7,25	14,40
	Ties	0		
	Total	14		

In this table, the finding was composed of an attitude questionnaire (Appendix 1) which had 10 items. With this 10 item attitude questionnaire, students' attitudes towards literature integrated lessons were investigated. It was observed that the degree of participation increased for the answers of items. To put it differently, before the treatment of literature integrated lesson plans into the traditional curriculum, some of the students marked “disagree”, after the treatment they marked “agree”.

Conclusion

Many researchers in the field of ELT and linguists have emphasized the use of literature in language classes by explaining its benefits. They have argued that literature is an authentic material because of the fact that it is not written for the sake of teaching a language. Lazar (1993) summarizes the reasons for using literature in language classrooms as its being very motivating and stimulus for language acquisition, helping students to understand another culture, developing students' interpretative abilities, expanding students' language awareness and encouraging students to talk about their opinions and feelings. Moreover, literature can help students to develop personal enrichment, language development and cultural enrichment as stated by many researchers such as Collie & Slater (1987), Lazar (1993), Carter & Brumfit (1986). Many language teachers have already been aware of these advantages of using literature in their classes, unfortunately, practically they do not use it "consciously" in their classes.

The statistical analysis revealed that employing short stories surely had significant effects on the improvement of learning motivation Iranian EFL learners. The results of the Chi-square indicated statistically significant differences between the performance of the learners on the questionnaire of motivation before and after the treatment. That is to say, employing short stories surely has motivated the young Iranian EFL learners to learn the second language better.

In our study, contrary to the mentioned teachers' attitudes towards the use of literature, students recognize that "appropriate short stories should be included in the course books" (the last item of the attitude questionnaire). Before the treatment, 7.1% of the students agreed as the above mentioned item. After the treatment phase, 57.1% of the students agreed that "appropriate short stories should be included in the course books". There is a common idea that students don't like literature and don't want to study it. Although in a study conducted by Hirvela and Boyle (1988), it was found that students fear of literature because of their insufficient literature background. In addition to this, Collie & Slater states that "as long as the reader is well-motivated, and as long as the experience of engaging with literature is kept sufficiently interesting, varied and non-directive to let the reader feel that he or she is taking possession of a previously unknown territory" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.6). As a result of our study, it can be said that students are not pleased with traditional curriculum and textbooks and that they want to study literary texts. That is, learning with traditional curriculum and literature integrated lesson plans make an important difference in students' attitudes towards ELT.

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