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Literature: an Effective Tool in Language Learning

J. Lakshmi, M.A., M.Phil. & J. Jayachandran, Ph.D.

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Study of Literature - A Source of All Skills

Literature – a repository of all human emotions - is a perennial source of language learning. There are number of ways to learn the language, among which language learning through literature makes the entire phenomenon colorful. Literature is the sublime record of human emotions. The plethora of emotions recorded in literature enables an individual to learn and master the language. This paper attempts to discuss the role of literature in the process of language learning with a few examples to support the point.

Language, broadly speaking, is one of the best and most effective means of communication without which we cannot lead a successful life. Literature equips us with powerful communicational abilities and aids. It is a rich resource for the learners to acquire all the basic skills of communications, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Learners, who acquire skills in the target language, will be able to delineate their ideas through a creative, emotive use of language.

Reading a Literary Work

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In reading a literary work, the learner is often encouraged to recreate the meaning or the reality the writer attempts to represent, through actively seeking evidence from the text and his own knowledge of the world. When the learner reads a literary piece with utmost love for it, he is motivated to interact with the text. This interactive relationship between the text and the reader will teach them to use the language judiciously to achieve the desired effect. In this aspect literary studies serve as a considerable aid to language learning, it deepens the learners sensitivity to language through heightening their critical ability and creative faculty.

“Reading makes a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man...” says Bacon in his essay “Of Studies”. Listening forms the base of all the other three skills: Reading, speaking and writing. A good listener who is able to comprehend the message he listens will certainly develop all the other skills required pertaining to language. Listening to literary texts read aloud in the classroom by the teacher, or among friends, listening to a record version of the text would definitely bring out its rhythmic quality and would kindle the interest of the learner.

Pronunciation

A good training in pronouncing the sounds of the target language will help the learner to use the language effectively. Teachers reading the text aloud number of times at various tempos would help the learners to enhance their understanding towards the language, familiarize the sounds, practice pronunciation of the target language, through which they can achieve an ease in using the language.

Listening Improves with Melody

Texts with highest musical quality stimulate the learners’ interest towards listening. Here is a stanza from Tennyson, which has been universally praised for the word music. Note the alteration and artistic arrangement of the consonants r, n, s, f and l

“O hark O hear how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer farther going!
O Sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Efland faintly blowing!

The verbal melody in the poem serves as a great source of pleasure and learning. No reader can resist the verbal beauty of Robert Burns; love lyric “A Red Rose”

“O, my love is like a red, red rose,

That's newly sprung in June
O, my love is like the melodies
That's sweetly played in tune."

Such text when used in activities like dictation, which would sharpen the listening skills of the reader, would add color to the entire task. The musical quality of the text would definitely create an unquenchable thirst in the learner for the language. Learner, when involves himself in various listening activities hones listening comprehension.

Speaking and Study of Literature

Speaking, undeniably, the most demanded skill can be acquired through regular touch with literature. People who are very good at talking about their pet subjects and themes, can also expand their language skills to a variety of subjects through literature. Literature is a sublime record of all aspects of life. It provides the learner with a wide range of subjects which the learner can use in any conversation.

Language aspects, which would enhance the communication skills of the speaker, like vocabulary, quotation, Idioms & Phrases and various other figures of speech can be learnt through literature.

Language Learning and Poetry

Poetry primarily deals with human experiences. Professor W.H.Hudson points out that "Poetry is made out of life, belongs to life, and exists for life". Mathew Arnold states: "The greatness of the poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life". The human experience that the poetry deals with is of universal character. The experiences dealt in poetry are recorded in symbols. The symbolic density of poems gives much scope for learning. It sharpens the interpretation skills of the learner. When the learner tries to unravel the meaning of the lines, when he tries to discover the poets mind through his words, it invariably induces the learner to infer, formulate ideas, analyze, all of which activities contribute to sharpen one's critical faculty. Poetry fosters the interpretative skills; a sound interpretation of the source text helps learners to learn the target language in a natural manner.

Acquisition of Vocabulary through Literary Study

Conscious and consistent attempts to improve vocabulary would bring out a big difference in the learners language. Literature undoubtedly is a good source of words. Reading a simple poem will definitely add a few new words to the learners' vocabulary. The right word used in the right place would facilitate better understanding. A Poem from Indian Literature is

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taken for analysis. Themes related to the learner's contemporary sociopolitical situations would appeal to their interest and would make learning comfortable.

NIGHT OF THE SCORPION

Nissim Ezekiel

I remember the night my mother
Was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
Of steady rain had driven him
To crawl beneath a sack of rice.
Parting with his poison-flash
Of diabolic tail in the dark room-
He risked the rain again.
The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the name of God a hundred times
To paralyze the evil one.
With candles and with lanterns
Throwing giant scorpion shadows
On the sun-baked walls
They searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement the scorpion made
His poison moved in mother's blood, they said.
May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight, they said.

May your sufferings decrease
The misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil
Balanced this unreal world
Against the sum of good
Become diminished by your pain, they said.
May the poison purify your flesh
Of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
They said, and they sat around
On the floor with my mother in the centre
,the peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbors,
More insects and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through
Groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
Trying every curse and blessing,
Powder, mixture, herb, and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
Upon the bitten toes and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man performing his rites
Too tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours it lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

A beginner would learn ten to fifteen new words and five to seven fixed and semi- fixed expressions from the above given text. Learning fixed and semi- fixed expressions are essential for vocabulary enhancement. Even if we were to learn a large number of new words in isolation it would not necessarily lead to expressing oneself correctly, as language also consists of group of words that usually go together. In learning English we need to focus on larger chunks of the language, which would help us string words together and express ourselves fluently and effectively. Examples are found in the above given text. Next to vocabulary and ready to use expressions quotations have an important place in language.

Development of Conversational Skills

A conversation started with an interesting quotation will certainly bring life to the conversation. Quotations used in discourse convey the idea of the speaker easily to the listener. There are works in literature containing quotation loaded with meanings. A good example will be Oscar Wilde's "Lady Wilder mere's Fan". The Witty, subtle language of Oscar Wilde will definitely grab the interest of learners. Some of the interesting quotes from the play;

"It is absurd to divide people in to good and bad. People are either charming or tedious."

"I can resist everything except temptation."

"Men become old, but they never become good."

"Crying is the refuge of plain women but the ruin of pretty ones."

"It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing."

"Between men and women there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship, love, but no friendship."

"With a proper background women can do anything."

"When men give up saying what is charming, they give up thinking what is charming."

One single play of Oscar Wilde contains so many quotes, expression, and usage. The subtle use of language, when the learners read, they can work to imitate the same in their

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conversation. Learning becomes an act of pleasure. Learners can take such interesting text and involve in activities like discussion, debates, presentation, which would heighten their communication skills. Such activities help the learners to bring out their latent potentials. Speaking is an important aspect of language learning and proficiency in it helps the learners to achieve an overall mastery over the target language.

“Reading makes a full man ...” Says Francis Bacon in his essay “Of Studies” A learner through reading literary works can improvise his language constantly. Regular reading gives the reader an insight in to the language and thereby he can develop better understand towards the language.

Developing Writing Skills

Competency in writing is another skill which a literary text nurtures in his learners. A literary text familiarizes learners with various aspects of written language – the structure, word order, diction, and different ways of expressing ideas, coherence in expressing ideas. All these aspects expand and enrich the written skills of the learner when a literary text is taught in the class room. Generally the students understanding of the text is tested through tests where they are required to write on their understanding towards the text. Write critical appreciation, essays, thematic analysis, and analysis of the characters present in the works. Such tasks will definitely bring out their ability to dig out meaning to generate and organize ideas and to discover meaning for themselves through the use of language. It gives them clear insights in to the nature of written communication. Recognizing that writing is primarily a means of communication, they would exercise more care in using and organizing language to shape the learners’ interpretation of what they have written. Another advantage that can be gleaned from asking students to constantly write about the literary works they read is that they can acquire a firmer mastery over the language.

An Integrated Process

Language learning is an integrated process. The entire process with all its ramifications can be mastered through literature. Though there are various other methods through which language can be introduced, taught and acquired, language through literature helps the reader to accomplish the task in a better way. Literature motivates the learners in all possible ways to work with the language. Learning is achieved through enjoyment and appreciation for the text.

Language learning through literature

Starts with delight and ends in wisdom.

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