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Exploiting Literature in the Teaching of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

The misconception that literature is a separate domain that hasn't any relevance to language learning exists among most teachers. This faulty assumption is found to be the result of the teacher's failure in recognizing the fact that literature is the sum product of the language. Furthermore, one ought to realize that literary masterpieces came into being only after the invention of the language. In fact, incorporating literature into the language curriculum motivates language learners and creates a cheerful environment in the classroom. The beneficial role of literary texts in Second Language Learning is studied in this paper with the help of authentic data elicited from an experiment carried out among learners. From the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, 50 undergraduates reading in the 3rd Year were selected at random and divided into two groups i.e. the control group and the experimental group. An identical Pre-test was conducted among both groups and the results were found to be with very little variation.

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A literature-based syllabus incorporating selected works of English literature fused with skill based language exercises was produced for the experimental group. Textbooks on the four skills covering the same components were recommended for instruction for the control group. Classes in course lessons specifically designed for each group were held for 6 months. At the end of these six months, the students were required to sit Post-tests. Their performances in the tests showed that the experimental group that followed instructions based on literature-specific syllabus fared much better than the control group. The findings have impacts over the currently adopted syllabuses and stressed the benefit of literature oriented language activities.

Key Words:

Literary Criticism, Communicative Skill, Motivation, Symbolic Expression, Cultural Information, Emotional Domain, Social Discourse

Introduction

Currently, one could sense a renewed interest that has been generated in the teaching of literature in the language class and a lot of comments have been made on the subject. But in the recent past, inclusion of literature in the language curriculum did not gain such popularity. At one time, it was a component in courses without any justification. Later although there was a greater emphasis on the spoken language classes, teachers were not keen in using literature in language classes.

Adoption in Three Models

In the 1980's a new track in language teaching originated. The place of literature in the ESL was both challenged and supported and ultimately the teaching of literature has been adopted to embrace the framework of three models:

- i) The cultural model
- ii) The language model
- iii) The personal growth model. (Bottino, 1986)

The Cultural model can be considered as a means of transmitting important ideas and feelings. Also students can have a good opportunity to become familiar with a variety of words and expressions in the target language. This model helps students to learn about a culture and the associated customs, other than their own.

With regard to language model, learner centered activities are recommended. Students are encouraged to focus how linguistic forms convey literary meanings and go beyond the literal interpretation of the lines.

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The third model, personal growth model is interpreted as an engagement with the reading of literary texts. The aim behind performing the tasks suggested in the third model is to motivate students to read by selecting themes, to a large extent, related to their personal experiences. Personal growth model is student centered.

The language model and the personal growth model are often closely linked and the cultural model contains elements of the others.

These three models for the use of literature in the language class lead to many issues. One of these issues concerns the value of the use of literature for study purposes and its use as a resource. Its use as a resource becomes a means of providing many linguistic opportunities to develop language skills among students.

Objectives of the Knowledge of Literature: *Personal Pleasure in Reading*

The first object of the knowledge of literature is that of personal pleasure in reading. The teaching method should allow the students to involve actively in reading the texts. Students shouldn't be passive listeners of ready-made information. A student-centered approach motivating students to involve and respond personally would be very effective in using literature as a resource.

Different episodes in the literary text make students to identify with their experiences, thoughts and situations. They will be able to enjoy it by relating it to what they know about themselves and the world. If a learner can do it despite linguistic problems and if the selected text is sufficiently exciting and appealing, it will serve as an incentive to overcome some of the difficulties. Furthermore, learners who are involved with the text with keenness will want to work at his or her own reading and will gain from the exposure to the language of literature. The text becomes a stimulus for the development of language.

Mixed Ability Class

With regard to the subject of including literature to the language teaching curriculum and applying it to the undergrads of the University of Jaffna, there are various issues that have to be considered. One of such issues concerns the fact that the classes are of mixed ability. Therefore, there may be students who have the only knowledge of very basic structure and vocabulary, and some may not possess even these. Naturally, students having only a basic knowledge will have difficulty in understanding the literary texts. Literary materials will be beyond their scope and literature will be a deterrent and can't bring in positive results.

Although weak students are found in a group, more proficient ones are also there. In such cases, it will be the responsibility of the teacher to determine the extent of the literature to be taught in the class according to the ratio between the weak students and the able ones.

Writing Critical Answers – Pieces of Literary Criticism

Another issue is about writing the literary criticism. The general tendency that could be found among students is to rely on others' comments and to make generalizations devoid of any valid analysis or sufficiently evaluating the views already expressed. To overcome this, prior preparation in classes is stressed. There should be adequate extent of class discussion on how to deal with the theme of the text and critically analyze the work. Students have to be motivated to think for themselves and develop a personal response, rather than just responding or retelling what is already suggested by other critics.

Literary Texts Provide a Variety of Language Activities

Literary texts would supply materials for a wide variety of language activities that may develop linguistic skills. They also offer interesting subjects for class discussion which, in turn, enable students to juxtapose their own ideas and to link their own ideas to other related topics.

The Use of Literary Texts in Language Teaching

The notion that learning a second language can be facilitated and made interesting through literature, has generated issues that concern language teachers and curriculum planners. It is widely recognized that language learning should correspond to the learners' needs outside the classroom. The knowledge they gain within the classroom should provide them with the distinct ability to cope with different situations tactfully to satisfy their needs.

English Language teaching is nowadays closely linked with the definition of language as a communicative skill which is essentially required in career opportunities, higher studies, trade activities etc.

The general issue with regard to the declining trend of English language proficiency is inevitably concerned with the teaching methods selected and adopted by language teachers. Teachers need to concentrate on teaching how language can be used rather than teaching about the language. Students' ability to use the language for multifarious purposes should be developed. Teachers should have a thorough understanding about the differences between teaching about the language and communicating in that language. Many teachers possess the misconception that knowledge about the language structure will lead the learners to use the language for communicative purposes.

Hence, as noted, there is a great gap between the students' knowledge about the structure of the language and their ability to use that knowledge for communication.

Bridging the Gap between Knowledge about the Structure and Ability to Use That Knowledge

To bridge this gap, and to motivate students to communicate, a syllabus the contents of which are identical to the features of real life social contexts should be designed. It is literature that can provide sufficient information about the society and its values, beliefs, preferences and priorities and customs in a typical form of language. The learner would be able to experience the real world within the classroom. The intellectual faculty of the learners needs to be further developed and they should have the access to various kinds of linguistic and literary expressions and interactive functions of the language. Learners should be trained to contextualize the linguistic elements in order to enable them acquire grammatical knowledge implicitly. To achieve this target, adequate language practice should be made available. Learners should be encouraged to use their knowledge about the rules of the language to function in that language successfully to fulfill their day-to-day requirements.

Literature and Real Life Situations

Literature exposes the language functions in real life situations outside the formal or artificial environment of the classroom. Literary elements like short stories, fables and dialogues will enable learners to use different forms of the language demanded by different situations.

In terms of language teaching, we can recognize a definition given by Baird (1969:203) for literature. "Literature is the use of language effectively in suitable conditions." Language teaching can be very effective with the use of literary texts, since language is appropriately adopted according to the contexts of the events, in literary texts.

Widdowson (1982) remarked that although the place of literature in language teaching was popular once, its prominence declined as language studies have been subjected to the influence of linguistics. It is generally argued that literature shouldn't be linked with language studies since its structural complexity and deviation from grammatical rules would impede learning. Therefore literature does not lead to the attainment of either linguistic competence or communicative competence.

Povey (1967) maintained that linguistic difficulty of literature has been exaggerated; It is not always essential for readers to comprehend the text fully to elicit information. Literature, of course, with its symbolic expressions of vocabulary and complex syntax can be effective sources for developing language skills.

Similarly cultural information that could be gathered from literature reflects the culture of a nation. Literature can also make students acquaint with the social and cultural values of the natives. (Adeyanju, 1978)

Also it should be noted that in some instances, alien, heavy and redundant type of literature, which is not related to students' immediate problems, could pose threats. Hence the opportunity for creativity is very much restricted. During the course of instruction, the teacher introduces literary terms, explains the semantic features of words and ultimately asks the students to critically comment on the literary piece, the cultural orientation of which may be far from the non-native speaker. Consequently, students are forced to respond by memorization. In some other instances, due to the non-interactive mode of the conduction of class, students are unable to respond but remain passive.

Encouraging Creative Process

A literary material promotes the creative process in the minds of the students. Literature motivates students to read in English. It is a vehicle demonstrating soundly the language use and introducing cultural norms. The literary texts to be selected should be in accordance with the linguistic and conceptual levels of students. Literary texts illustrate how language functions in contexts. They also show how language could be used in which conditions and situations.

The use of literary texts in language teaching can be summarized, as follows.

- Literary texts will help to develop all the four language skills.
- By using and analyzing literary texts, students are able to familiarize with real life events and experiences.
- Through the use of literary texts, it will be possible to realize the individual and societal developments.
- They enable the readers to develop a cultural awareness. Also, they become effective means to keep away from the mother tongue interferences.
- Literary texts promote the students' analytical and criticizing skills.

Benefits of Using Literary Texts in Second Language Classrooms

It seems to be obvious that literature becomes an excellent source promoting language acquisition. In second language classrooms, students are expected to read and write to have a better vision and understanding of the input in the target language. It is often emphasized that students should have a clear understanding of the written input in English so that they can process and interpret the target language. By providing interesting contents for the students to generate input, negotiate meaning and develop motivation, literature serves effectively in the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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process of language acquisition.(krashen,1985). Since different shades of meanings are contained in literary pieces, they can create interest among students during classroom activities that demand conveyance of feelings and opinions. Such activities have the potential to develop interaction among students. They grow keen in taking part in the activities and enjoy contextualize the meanings corresponding to different social and cultural situations.

The use of literature generates motivation among students. Literature strikes positively the affective and emotional domains of students and arouses them to involve with marked eagerness in identifying the intended meaning in specific situations. Course books do not seem to have contents supplying materials for any emotional and reflective engagement with the target language. Course books devoid of contents having the capacity to create an impetus for active engagement of learners, focus only on the structural aspects of the language. The structure-based course books ultimately, end up in, to a great extent of adverse impacts such as hatred and monotony among learners. Such course books fail to bring in a true sense of involvement which is quite essential for effective communication that won't be the overall goal of language learning.

Learners are deprived of the emotional engagement with the target language and denied the pleasure of using the language for imaginative and reflective purposes.(Mc Rae, 1991). Motivation, as an engaging force persuades learners to explore more of the foreign language system, beyond the mere mechanical aspects. When a reasonable time is spent on exploring a piece of literature, i.e. a novel or a short story, the learner imbibes the socio-cultural information and gets acquainted with the text.

Krashen (1982) illustrated how the engagement with the written input in the second language leads to the success of second language acquisition, through his affective filter hypothesis. Greater benefits that can be derived from the use of literary texts in place of the form-based course books should be taken into account, in this context. Hence the discussion here can be realized to have stressed the inevitable need for the students' personal sense of involvement in reading and writing for reaping the optimum out of the language input found therein.

Another benefit of the use of literature in second language acquisition is that it creates cultural awareness in students. Literary texts are repository of people's attitudes, beliefs, preferences and priorities, customs, traditions etc. across the cultures of the world. Though literary texts mirror a comprehensive view of culture, they may also pose some problems pertaining to the realization of culture in the target language. The cultural dissimilarity may create a "cultural shock" which, in turn, hinders the learning process. Besides, strangeness associated with a new culture may be an element causing confusion among learners. For example, let's consider the following popular nursery rhyme.

Baa Baa Black Sheep
Have you any wool
Yes sir, Yes sir
Three bags full
One for my master
One for the dame
And one for the little boy
Who lives down the lane.

The black sheep and wool as mentioned in the rhyme may not be familiar to all the learners. Sri Lankan native children may not be aware of the use of woolen clothes or caps worn by people in cold regions to keep themselves warm. Lack of comprehension may impede learners from appreciating the poem and subsequently their interest to learn the language declines.

In place of the above rhyme, the author of this article suggests the following rhyme composed by him, in which learners come across native cultural elements with which they are very familiar.

Cluck Cluck Gray Hen
Have you any eggs
Yes Ma, yes Ma
Three big ones
One for my Mistress
One for the Babe
And one for the Beggar Boy
Who strays by the Beach

Developing Appropriate Social Discourse

Literature can be viewed as social discourse. “This can serve to free literature from its exclusivist and isolationist credentials by ‘democratizing and dehegamonizing’ access to literature (Carter, 1997: p109). This approach to literature as social discourse can enable students to understand the target culture of literary texts. Students are able to study the social, political and historical events, which are behind the background of a particular piece of literature.

Lazar (1993) maintained that literature enables the reader to contextualize how a member of a particular society might behave or react in a specific situation. Students are able to discern how people observing different cultures relate to their experiences and assess them. It leads the students to identify the core of human situations that may occur cross-culturally.

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Literature and Language Awareness

Another benefit of the use of literature is to promote language awareness among learners. Lexical and syntactical aspects found in respective contexts become a source of interest for students. Lengthy exposure to literary texts makes students to familiarize with the promiscuous language features and motivates them to develop a tendency of response. In the course of response, students become aware of how meaning as an outcome of response would lead to the imaginative use of language. (Collie and Slater, 1987)

Misconceptions about the Use of Literature

Some misconceptions regarding the use of literature in the language class are found to prevail. One such misconception is that teaching the grammar of the language is neglected as the language used in literature is complex and specific. In fact, the use of literature promotes language acquisition. Through provision of contexts for processing and interpreting new language, literature corresponds to the limited input of the class. Literature can significantly help students to internalize vocabulary and grammar patterns. (Widdowson, 1975).

Another illusion is that literature has nothing to do with the students' academic or professional goals. Nevertheless one ought to recognize the fact that literature contributes toward the achievement of these goals by fostering considerably an increase in reading proficiency. Gaies (1979) held that in the process of reading, a sound interaction between the reader and the writer occurs.

This implies that reader is willing to interact with a particular text, and for this reason, the motivational factors involved in reading assume critical importance. Therefore, by developing reading proficiency, literature would facilitate attaining the students' academic and professional goals.

The Method Adopted in the Present Research

Fifty undergraduates in the 3rd year in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna were selected for the study. They were divided into two target groups of students. Group A is considered as a Control group and Group B, Experimental group.

Materials

Two different syllabuses were utilized for teaching English language skills. For **Group A**, instructions on language skills, without any exposure to literary discourse were imparted. **Group B** was exposed to a syllabus that comprised different literary forms.

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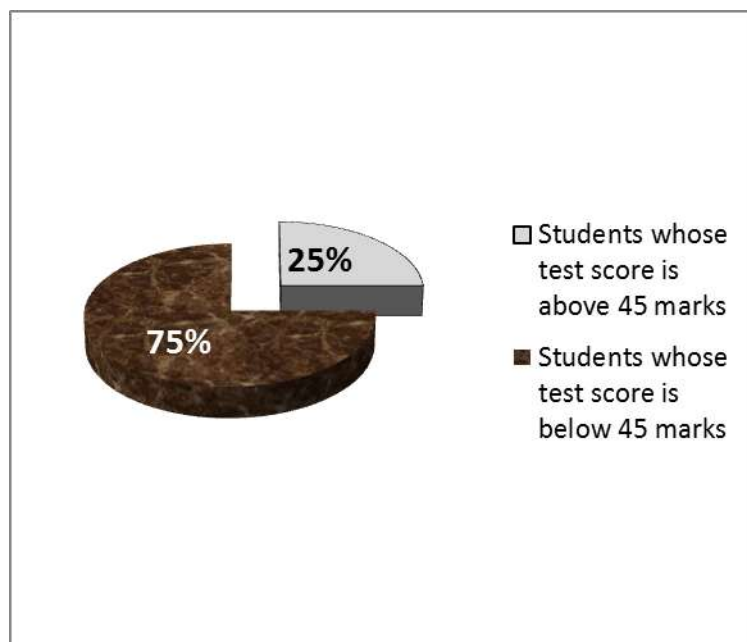
Procedure

A Pre-Test was conducted among the two groups to assess the language skills that were to be taught to them. These groups were imparted instruction for a complete semester. After the end of the programme, these groups were given Post-Tests based on their different syllabuses.

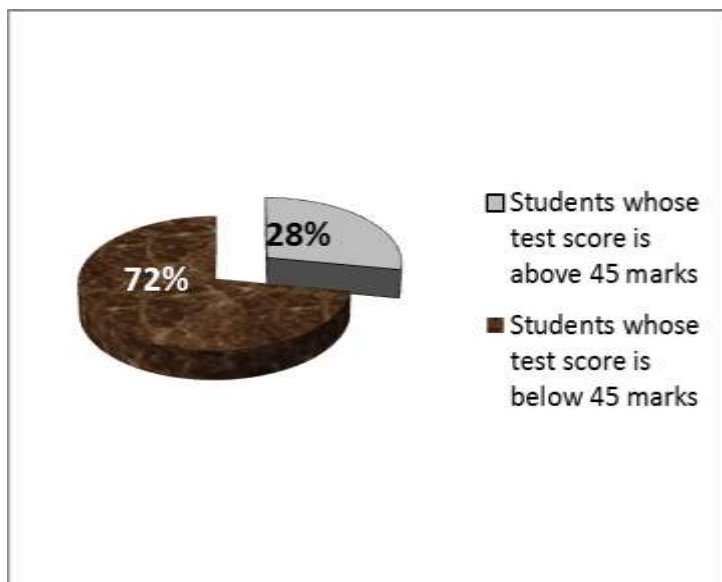
Results and Data Analysis

The students' performances in the Tests administered to the two groups represent the outcome of the current research.

The result of the Pre-Tests reveals that the level of basic language skills of the groups remains almost the same, with very little variation that can be ignored. The result of the Control group is represented by Pie-Chart-A and that of the Experimental group is demonstrated in Pie-Chart-B.



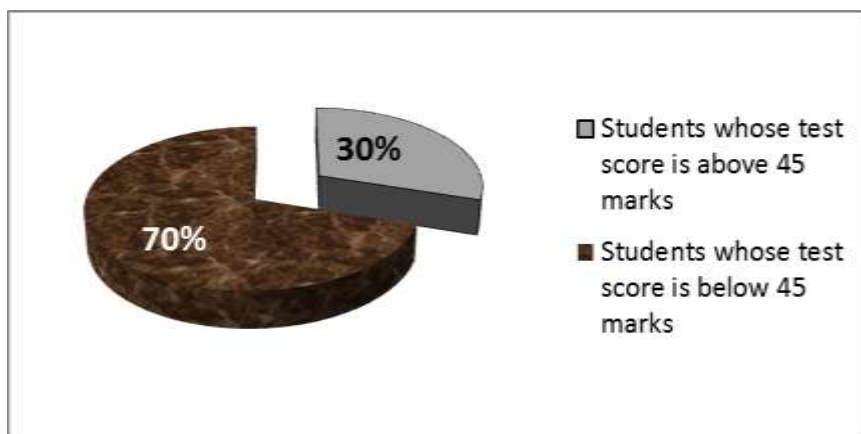
Pie Chart - A



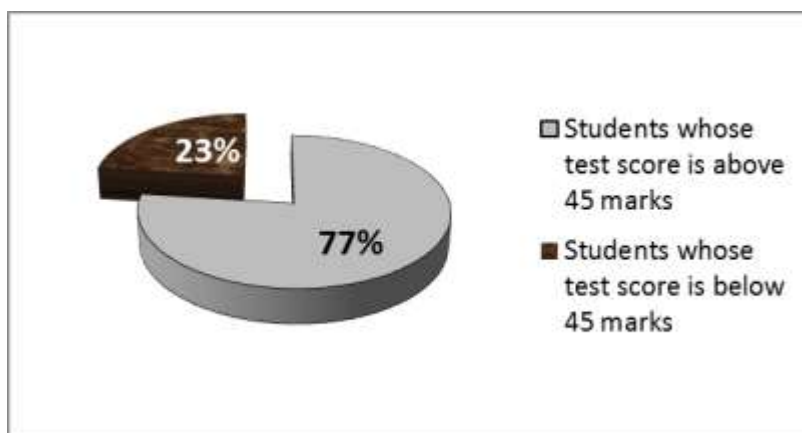
Pie Chart - B

The duration of the study was for a complete semester in which the control group was given instructions in language skills through a language specific syllabus devoid of literary discourse. The experimental group was taught to promote their language skills through exposure to literary texts.

At the end of the semester when the instructions were complete, the two groups were administered Post-Tests based on the contents of the syllabuses designed separately for them. The result of the Control group is shown in Pie-Chart C and that of the experimental group in Pie-Chart D.



Pie Chart - C



Pie Chart - D

Pie-Chart C and D reflect the findings of the Post-Tests administered to the Control group and the Experimental group. The experimental group has remarkably greater gain in language skills than the control group. These findings are an obvious indication to the fact that the inclusion of literary text has helped the students of the experimental group to rise dramatically in language proficiency.

During the teaching sessions, the following observations in terms of the students' performance in both groups were made.

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In case of the classes of the Experimental group, various literary forms such as a novel, drama and poetry were used and subsequently the following benefits were identified.

Using Novel

The use of novel was found to be a remarkably effective technique motivating students to acquaint with the linguistic system as well as life in relation to target language since characters in the novel resemble people in real life. Novels not only depict but also enlighten human life. Novels lead the students to develop their knowledge about different social groups and the nuances of their related cultures. Since novels reflect real life experience, students' motivation was promoted, their creative thinking initiated and their ability to use the language for critically analyzing the aspects of life heightened.

Using Drama

Drama offered an excellent resource for students to develop their communicative competence. Students came across grammatical features in contexts and practiced to use the language for expressions in the form of argument, apology, request, complaint etc. Drama is identified to have the capacity to enable the students to be well versed in the target language and culture. Through identifying their own experience with that expressed by drama, students were able to manipulate the language to perform their functions successfully in the natural environment. As drama involves deep, intense emotions, students were found to make use of drama to have a better and balanced understanding of the worldly phenomenon and use the language to regulate and control their emotions in daily life.

Using Poetry

It is discovered that through the inclusion of poetry, students became familiar with figures of speech, such as similes, metaphors, irony, imagery, personification etc. which form a part of daily language use. Students reacted strongly as poetry seems to be a powerful tool evoking strong feelings among them. Students were able to recognize the rules governing the organized form of language and, instead of undergoing repeated drills and oral practices which are supposed to be form-focused traditional teaching methods, they could use the language for communicative purposes. Further, they improved their vocabulary significantly. Poetical works became a source of different interpretations for different students. They could develop a sense of exploration and delve into the verse with refreshed interest.

In case of the control group, the students' keenness in learning the language was relatively less. Most of the students attempted to memorize the meanings of words and to learn grammar and syntax without any ability to apply such knowledge for interaction. Their experience within the classroom was different from their experience outside the classroom, as the input during the class seemed to be probably unnatural. Students were in a rigid condition that could not allow them to interact freely with the teacher or peers because the teacher spoke most of the time while the students remained passive during the classes.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Post-Test result indicates that the experimental group scored higher marks due to the effect and usefulness of the literary texts they studied. The inclusion of literature in the curriculum of the non-native learners of English leads to remarkable gains. As the use of language is manipulated in different social contexts, the linguistic competence and the communicative competence are simultaneously developed among learners through literary texts.

Further, literature would create an intercultural awareness while sustaining a tolerance for diversity.

The teacher should realize the responsibility of selecting short stories suitable to the level of the students to promote their reading habit and to provide better chances to contextualize linguistic elements.

When selecting a literary text, teachers should focus on the link between the objective of language learning and the text under consideration. In this respect, learners' needs, level, ability and interests should be taken into account. For pupils in primary classes, short rhymes and games are some sources offering fun for them. As matured learners are concerned, literary texts become an effective means to acquire the language for communicative purposes. As grammar is learnt implicitly in the process of learning a language through literature, learners are able to master the native-like speech. Teachers are supposed to realize that the real outcome of language teaching should be the ability of spontaneous and effective use of the language, in the part of students.

It is apparent that literature can be effectively exploited to acquire language and used for communication in real life situations.

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