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Developing Literary Competence – The Role of Reading: Implications for Classroom Teaching

S. Gayathri, M.A. (English)

Language and Literature

A language exists in full actuality in literature. It is there as idioms, phrases, words and so on with the meaning, intention, force, etc. Language provides an analogue for a culture. Literature is a mode or manifestation of language.

In this paper, an attempt is made to highlight the inter-relatedness of language and literature and to identify the strategies that can be used to develop in the learner both linguistic and literary competence. The paper also attempts to find out how 'Reading' as a skill can be developed and used for realizing the objectives of both literature and language.

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Literary Competence

The term *literary competence* is used in this paper to refer to the development of the following abilities:

Understanding plain sense

Understanding context

Learning to empathize

Learning to appreciate

Learning to be creative

All the above constitute literary competence.

All the issues stated above are discussed in relation to the prevailing system of language education at the first year degree level in terms of the classroom methodology, content prescribed and so on.

Acquisition of Communicative Competence

English has been taught as a second language in a multilingual context in India. The objectives of teaching English vary from level to level. However the ultimate objective has been to develop communicative competence and thus acquiring the target language.

Communicative competence can be acquired through getting exposed to language in different situations and to the different models of language. The different models of language include the language of literature which could be deviant. This implies the need

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on the part of the learner to acquire certain skills required to understand the language of literature and thus become literary competent.

Literary Competence

The term *literary competence* is used in this paper to refer to learner's ability to understand and comprehend the language of literature which includes the stylistic features of the language, the ability to understand the emotions that the language gives rise to and the skill to appreciate and become creative to express the emotions and display the sensitivity to the emotions and feelings expressed. The language of literature has also the potential to perform the aesthetic function of language. The language learner then has to acquire both language competence and other nuances of language to facilitate the development of literary competence.

This will be possible only if the learner is exposed to texts which have both the language of the society (for social interaction) and the particular language required for expressing emotions and other related issues.

Importance of Reading for Developing Literary Competence

Of the four skills the skill which requires focus to realize the objective of becoming communicatively competent and display literary competence is "reading".

This paper thus attempts to demonstrate how reading can be an effective tool to understand the role of literary texts and acquire literary competence.

The term *reading* is used to refer to a process which ends in comprehension of a text at different levels. While in the process of comprehending a text the reader involves

himself/herself in interpreting the language in relation to the context around which the text is built using different meaning-extracting strategies. That is the learner negotiates with the language for meaning. Through the use of interpretative procedures the learners (readers) supply meanings and impute underlying patterns even though the surface content will not reveal the meanings to an observer unless his model is directed to such elaborations (Cicourel 1973).

Application of Strategies

The process of reading requires the application of Meta cognitive, cognitive and socio affective strategies for effective comprehension. The learner thus interacts with the print using his/her own schemata. In other words, the learner uses his/her past experience to find the meaning that is not explicitly stated.

While dealing with literary texts the learner is assumed to have comprehended the texts only if the learner has

Understood the plain sense of text

Understood the content

Learnt to empathize

Learnt to appreciate

Learnt to be creative

Learnt the critical framework (Jane Spiro, 1990)

Understanding the Plain Sense of the Text

Understanding the plain sense of the text includes getting the general gist of the text and the specific meaning that can be related to culture, through the understanding of

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the use of lexical items and find if the lexical system is related to different values or attitudes.

Understanding the Context

Understanding the context includes the understanding of author's life, the socio-historical cultural and geographical background in which the text is woven.

Learn to Empathize

As has been mentioned in the beginning, learning to empathize is another aspect of literary competence. This involves understanding the feelings, characters, events, scenes, settings, personalizing, comparing experiences and feelings, and sharing them if need be.

This includes the ability to appreciate the language and the different stylistic features of the text.

Language Deviance in Literature

Once the learner is done with understanding of these things, the learner proceeds further to be creative in expressive feelings and moods, describing characters, settings and events and in using the figurative language in context. The language in literature deviates from the language of everyday communication in the choice of lexical, grammatical forms, phonological deviations and the syntax in English.

Need for Need-based Instruction

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All these can be achieved only by making instruction in reading more need-based and task oriented. For every stage in the process of acquiring literary competence different types of tasks can be thought of.

The following are some of tasks suggested in the objectives of teaching literature.

- True/False Questions
- Paraphrase
- Summary
- Using Dictionaries
- Time Charts/Diagrams
- Reorganization Of Events/Lines
- Identifying Author/Content
- Research
- Looking At Newspaper,Biographies
- Dramatisation
- Role Play
- Drawing Costumes
- Drawing Stage Sets
- Drawing Settings
- Predicting Events
- Personalising Scene,Events,Feelings
- Comparing Expression
- Comparing Feelings
- Resetting Story
- Listening To Music
- Tapping Rhythms

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- Making Sounds
- Making Background
- Singing
- Comparing Texts
- Comparing Topics
- Gap Filling
- Rewriting
- Comparing Picture/Text
- Comparing Music/Text
- Comparing Text
- Inventing Sounds
- Building Up Rhyme
- Building Up Lexical Sets
- Making Comparisons
- Building Up Images
- Describing Pictures, Music
- Changing Point Of View

Examples

1) The language of literature deviates in semantic relation

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window paints inanimate things that are sometimes prescribed as if they were living.

2) Items received to contradict each other or put together

The child is the father of man

3) Abstract things are described as if they were concrete.

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The box of truism shapes like a coffin.

4a) Look at the following words and then write the words that you think can be associated with them.

4b) Look at these inanimate words.

What animal could you imagine them to be?

Night

Sky

Fog

Look at the word fog and the animal you have chosen in (a) above. Then list the similarities you find between them.

5) Developing creative expression (asking the learners to use the above words and images in writing few lines of verse or slogan and so on)

Learner Behaviour

In all these processes and tasks the learner is using the language present (i.e., the existing linguistic competence in him/her) and incidentally acquires the ability to communicate more effectively and thus he/she learns to use the acquired language both in social and academic contexts in fulfilling the purposes that language intends to serve.

To Conclude

To sum up it can be observed that literary competence can be developed by promoting reading and designing tasks that enable the learner to understand and acquire the language of literature.

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