

# ***Teaching English as a Foreign Language through Literature***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Literature in all forms and languages serves as a gateway for people to get introduced to culture, history, authors, and background of the period the literature piece was written in. In addition to giving people perspective of the above-mentioned elements of literature, studies have shown that literature could also be used as a means of teaching a foreign language to students, regardless of age or background. However, for the effective integration of literature in EFL classes teachers must be aware of their students' needs, knowledge, culture, and linguistic capabilities. This will allow teachers to assess what pieces of literature would be most appropriate to use and they will be able to present the historical background for the piece/text chosen to their students. Moreover, one of the considerations for the effective use of literature in teaching EFL is choosing a piece that would be of interest to the class, in terms of cultural relevance so that students are engaged and motivated. Lastly, another consideration is age. Age is a significant factor in selection of the appropriate methods for students, as adults and young learners typically have different purposes and motivations, especially when learning a foreign language.

**Keywords:** *FLT, Teaching Methods, Hybridity, Non-native speakers.*

## **ÖZ**

Edebiyat, yazıldığı dönemi ayrıntılarıyla anlamamızı sağlayan çeşitli kültür, tarih ve yazarları baz alarak bize sunan bir geçit aracıdır. Okunduğu dönemle ilgili farklı bakış açılarını kazandırmasına ek olarak yabancı dil öğreniminde kullanılabilirliği de yapılan çalışmalarca kanıtlanmıştır. Yabancı dil öğretiminde, sınıf ihtiyaçları ve öğrenim şekilleri çeşitli faktörlerce belirlenmiş olup uygun edebiyat eserinin uygun seviyesi ile farklı gruplara hitap etmesinin mümkün kılındığı gözlemlenmiştir. Yaş, çevre ve benzeri faktörler göze alınarak yürütülen çalışmalarda, elde edilen bulgular

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Review Article- Submit Date: 03.12.2021, Acceptance Date: 10.02.2022

DOI: 10.17932/IAU.IJMCL.2015.014/ijmcl\_v07i2006

edebiyatın yabancı dil öğretimine olumlu yansıdığı yönündedir. Kullanılacak edebiyat metni seçilirken, seviyeye ve hitap ettiği kitleye göre belirlenmesinde öğreticiye önemli rol düşer. Bu bağlamda, yaş, öğrenme motifleri ve hedefteki seviyenin uygulanabilirliği açısından, öğrenme yöntemi belirlenirken amaç-sonuç ilişkisine yönlendirmede önemli rol oynar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Edebiyat, Öğrenme Yöntemleri, Öğrenme Etkenleri.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper will focus on the concept of using literature in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), specifically, the focus will be on the significance of using literature in English language learning, using literature with non-native speakers of English, young and adult English language learners, and approaches that can be used in teaching EFL through literature.

Moreover, this paper will look into the various types of research that were conducted to measure the benefits of using literature in teaching a foreign language. One research study was carried out by Chen, Chen and Sun (2010) on fifty-six Taiwanese high-school students to improve comprehension skills of students learning English as a foreign language in a three-month period. This study revealed a significant improvement in the students' reading skills, as well as an improvement in literacy overall. The teachers were also more capable of gauging and assessing the students and noted noticeable improvement when using literary pieces in terms of student discussion, and engagement. Thus, integrating literary texts for EFL students could introduce them to new vocabulary and allow them to interact with the language in a more engaging and interesting manner.

However, a research study by Alfaki (2014) presented how literature could, if not implemented effectively, lead to disengagement in the students, and a lack of willingness to learn through the selected literary pieces. These findings came from the introduction of literary pieces that to secondary school students in northern Sudan. Literary pieces such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Treasure Island*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Oliver Twist*, *Anna and the Fighter*; where the novels exceeded the students' literacy, or comprehension skills, as well as their cultural backgrounds. That is why, it is essential for the teachers to assess their students' needs and capabilities in choosing pieces that would most benefit the class, especially younger students, which will be discussed further in another section of this paper. Ur (2002) highlights how utilizing literature could be a useful addition to a classroom for its contribution to the enjoyment and interest of the learners, while also addressing the issues that accompany literature, such as some texts being disengaging for the students, which could be solved through careful selection of literary pieces (p. 202).

There are two schools of thought regarding the integration of literature in an English teaching classroom. The first school argues that the topics of linguistics need to be the focus, such as syntax, grammar, semantics, and phonology. While the other school argues that understanding literature needs to be the objective of the class, such as studying, and analyzing the works of poets, and authors alike. According to Salih (1989), “the study of literature has a significant role to play in university English programs and that a positive correlation exists between literature on the one hand and students’ language skills and linguistic knowledge on the other” (p. 26).

Teaching a foreign language through literature usually entails the use of poems, novels, plays, and basic anthology. Literature is vast and there exists a huge number of entries for teachers to choose the most appropriate texts depending on the level of the class, background of the students, and the frequency and ease of which the students use the English language in class. Moreover, a teacher must use literature in a way that would improve the four main language skills of students, which are speaking, writing, reading, and listening. When literature is being used, these skills cannot be neglected, and must be used in parallel with the teaching methods the teacher decides to use in class.

Literature reflects the culture, history, and traditions of the time when a piece was written. This is an important factor that teachers need to examine when designing a syllabus for their English classes. It would be most suitable to find a piece that students could relate to, while also engaging their thoughts for healthy discussions in a classroom environment. It is important to understand literature, as well as the most efficient way to utilize it in English teaching. It is common to think that literature is for advanced English studies only and could be difficult to understand in some contexts. That is why, when using literature to teach EFL, it is imperative for a teacher to recognize what the class needs are, and what purpose the class serves. Through doing so, the teacher will be able to choose literary pieces that are more relevant, as well as beneficial to the class. According to Kramsch (1993):

Many arguments have been made in recent years for including literary texts in the readings taught in language classes. More than any other texts, it is said, the piece of literary prose or poetry appeals to the students’ emotions, grabs their interest, remains in their memory and makes them partake in the memory of another speech community (p.130).

Including literary texts in classes increases motivation, and eagerness to learn. However, that cannot be the only focus of the class as it is just as important to learn the spoken language, as much as the written, which would be done through activities that would simulate real-life situations, that students can connect with, as well as use in everyday life. Integration of the four language skills mentioned above is crucial to achieve fluency and proficiency in English, as Shamsitdinova (2018) mentions, “Integrating the four language skills in instruction raises learners’ proficiency levels and enables advanced language learning. It enables students to

use the language for purposeful communication” (p. 118). Thus, the teacher needs to acknowledge the purpose of the class before employing any teaching method. For this paper, it will be assumed that the purpose is teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), meaning that teachers will be teaching non-native students from different backgrounds, cultures, and of various ages.

## **1.0 Significance of Utilizing Literature in English Teaching**

It is important to understand what addition literature would bring into an English teaching class. Vocabulary for instance, could be improved using literature, and grammar as well. A study by Horst, Cobb, and Meara (1998) was done on thirty-four students at a university in Oman to establish the relationship between reading and learning new words and vocabulary. Through reading a literary piece, students were eventually able to associate new words, and had acquired new vocabulary due to the frequent use of some words in the novels. Therefore, it is recommended for teachers to use novels, and focus on high-frequency vocabulary to get the students accustomed to the language, and attain knowledge of certain vocabulary that they will most likely see in different literary pieces. Moreover, literature allows the students to relate to the language, and the author. It would connect them to the significance of the language and would allow further understanding of the culture behind the literary piece. According to Mitchell (1989), “literature extends the second language classroom beyond its four walls and into the community of the target language and culture” (p. 74).

Using English literature in classrooms not only improves the four language skills, but also benefits the learners beyond the walls of the classroom, and its syllabus. Hismanoglu (2005) writes about the various reasons why any teacher might want to include literature in an English teaching class. These reasons being valuable authentic material (providing students with knowledge on various linguistic forms), cultural enrichment (adds to the cultural grammar, as well as understanding of foreign cultures through storytelling and literary texts), language enrichment (learn syntax and improve understanding of the written language), and personal involvement (students are more interested to learn the language as they become more involved in the literary texts) (p. 55). Each of these additions is valuable and provides learners with a more accessible use of the language through literature. However, to truly take full advantage of using literary texts in classes, teachers are always required to mind the approaches they use, some of which are further discussed in the next section.

### **1.1 Approaches to Teaching EFL Through Literature**

Firstly, some learners might not have the language ability to fully grasp the message being conveyed. Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Jusoff (2009) think that proficiency levels between the students and the literary piece being used need to be equivalent. It is vital to do so as to avoid disengagement from the students,

and lack of motivation towards the lesson (p. 52). The pieces to be chosen must be at an equal level of the class' understanding, as well as belonging to the same culture to be more relatable. For example, interest in fiction has been very widely expressed in recent years by teenagers. Using the books of *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and such works, would surely bring interest and relevance to the class, as well as increase engagement and willingness to learn.

Secondly, a study by Mustakim, Mustapha and Lebar (2014) was conducted to evaluate the different approaches when teaching contemporary children's literature that were used by five different EFL teachers, from five different schools in Malaysia. This study revealed what approaches best suited the students through observing the classrooms, and using semi-structured interviews conducted with the teachers to further understand the results of the study. The study observed on year five students revealed the approaches that resonated most with the teachers were the Information-Based Approach and the Paraphrastic Approach. The Information-Based Approach consisted of teachers providing background information of the literature being used, as well as provide context to the class, thus ensuring that the students acquire knowledge on the literary pieces, while also understanding the subject matter. The Paraphrastic Approach involved the teachers explaining the literature to their students using simple terms, thus ensuring they understand through feedback provided post-class, as well as from class discussions. This study suggests the various approaches that could be used by teachers when integrating literature in their classroom and provides reasoning for the most suitable methods. However, the approaches used also depend on several factors, such as proficiency of the students, their age, and cultural background. Thus, before implementing a specific approach, teachers must always be aware of these factors and choose the most appropriate one.

Furthermore, historical background of the literary pieces chosen by the teacher must be given, as this initially introduces the class to the society of the language being taught. Using literature for English teaching provides the students a sort of access to different societies that come to existence through reading the literature of that language. Language, literature, and culture are all intertwined and play a role in shaping one another. Language reflects cultures, traditions, and beliefs of a society, and as such, the literary works of any language act as reflection for the tenets of society in the period where those pieces were written (Permawardhena, 2005, p. 94). Through introducing a historical background, literature can then be integrated in English teaching classes to improve the language skills of EFL learners.

In addition, teachers need to have ELF awareness when teaching English, as several students would have different backgrounds, which would mean that students might have developed different pronunciations and different forms of speaking the English language. It is crucial for the teacher to be aware of these while teaching English, especially when wanting to apply literature in their classrooms. Strong (1996)

claims that using literature in classrooms can motivate the students and get them more engaged in reading especially when the students are provided with a wide selection of literature that play to their interest. In addition to improving reading skills, literature also provides the students with an opportunity to learn about the different cultures and their values, and thus would be a great addition to use in EFL classes (p. 291).

Hence, the teacher must avoid conforming to one form of literature. For example, using purely British/American literary texts would ultimately create a false narrative of how English is spoken in realistic terms. To avoid creating this false narrative, teachers should ideally use a mixture of literary texts from around the world, some from native English speakers, and some from non-native English speakers. The next section dives deeper into this issue, and how to go around using the proper literary texts with non-native speakers.

## **2.0 Using Literature with Non-native Speakers of English**

This section will mainly focus on how different students of different backgrounds, more specifically, non-native speaking ones, or as mentioned previously, EFL learners, would be able to relate to the literature and consider the effectiveness of using literature with those learners. Permawardhena (2005) points out the several benefits of integrating literature in EFL classes and states that doing so enhances the students' skills in more than one area. The integration of literature allows the students to develop their critical thinking, and analytical skills, while also exposing them to different cultures, as well as how the language is used in different societies according to the period that the piece was set in (p. 96). Literature continuously proves to be a worthy addition for teachers in the EFL classrooms where students could have noticeable improvements in many aspects of the English language, as well as the four main skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Literature also allows the students to be more expressive in a foreign language as they become more aware and knowledgeable on how the language is used in communication. In addition, a study carried out by Yeasmin, Azad and Ferdoush (2011) on first-year undergraduate students in ASA University Bangladesh found that the use of literature in EFL classes created a more enjoyable environment that allowed students to participate more often. The students were interested and more engaged in the learning process and seemed to enjoy stories that were written by natives (p. 293).

To efficiently integrate literature in English language teaching, teachers must consider using literary texts from various authors of various backgrounds to provide a better understanding of how English is used globally, and to also eliminate the idea of *perfect English* in literature, as well as in real life. Hybridity in literature could be seen as a solution to introducing students from different cultures and backgrounds to a piece of literature. When non-Western authors use hybridity, they mix their own culture with that of the West, making their literary piece more relevant to readers from both cultures. Many authors use hybridity of languages when writing

literary texts, and teachers implementing these texts in classes provide a wider view of the use of English in communication, while also providing better engagement from students that come from the same background, or culture of the author. The use of hybridity adds to the understanding of the students from the cultural aspect as it becomes more relatable. Thus, teachers must also attempt to create a relation between the students and the literary texts through culture to maintain relevance. The concept of hybridity in literature serves as a benefit to both teachers and learners, as it makes relating to the texts simpler through engaging them by associating to their culture and norms. Bayyurt (2018) provides examples of such authors that use hybridity in their texts such as Orhan Pamuk, 2006 Nobel prize winner, that uses English and Turkish languages in his works. Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner* (2003), is another author that equips hybridity in his novels through using words in Pashto and translating those words to English throughout the novel (p. 10).

Moreover, choosing a wrong literary piece in a diverse class could lead to a confused environment, with students not being able to follow the pace of the literary piece. In addition, utilizing literature in a class of different backgrounds would provide the students with insight on how the language originated, its culture, and how the language is generally spoken, and written. However, the literature used in the class needs to be inclusive of all students to avoid marginalizing them. Inclusivity would improve participation among students, and lead to more discussions that allow the teacher to further assess their students' learning. Thus, it is crucial for the literature the teacher chooses to be both beneficial for their EFL class, as well as encouraging students to learn more about the literary pieces. Landt (2006) emphasizes this point by suggesting that teachers integrate multicultural literature and offers a guide on how a teacher could proceed with picking a hybrid literary piece. She continues to write that realism, diversity, depiction of minority characters, authenticity of the dialogue (culturally) are all factors that teachers need to consider when picking a text that will serve to be multicultural and inclusive for their students (p. 695). In addition to using relatable material, for a teacher to be most effective, they might also need to use L1 to reach less experienced students and get their understanding. Utilizing the students' L1, however, should be minimal and only used in classes of beginner levels.

To achieve the most out of English teaching, one must be able to adopt and integrate different methods into the class, and keep the students interested and engaged. Relying only on literature might produce unmotivated students who do not understand the use of the spoken language. As mentioned by Butler (2006), students need to fully understand and grasp the literary pieces used in class and be able to emerge themselves in the literature. Through this emergence, students are more indulged in the writing, improving their critical thinking skills, in turn with their other language skills (p. 61). Thus, it is significant to include teaching methods that would bring knowledge of how the language is used on an everyday basis, as well as maintain the use of contemporary teachings, such as task based, and competency-based methods. Moreover, Butler (2006) cites various authors that

suggest many methods, that teachers can use to aid students in getting motivated and more interested in learning literature and in turn learning the English language. For example, Tomshca (1987) recommends that teachers use their students' native language to re-write literary texts, such as poems and ask their students to translate those texts back to English, ultimately comparing their work with the original (as cited in Butler, 2009, p. 61). The integration of various methods ultimately relies on the purpose of the class, and once that is recognized by the teacher, the method to choose also becomes more obvious.

## **2.1 Use of Literature with Young and Adult Learners**

When teaching literature, the age of the learners plays an important role in absorbing the information provided by the teacher. Adults and children tend to learn differently especially when it comes to second language acquisition. Brain capacity, psychological factors, exposure to the language, are all factors that determine the learning capacity for young and adult learners. Saville-Troike (2006) addresses this by acknowledging that adult learners have better memory and could thus memorize new vocabulary at capacities larger than younger learners. Moreover, their analytic capability also allows them to better understand the rules of a language, and its grammar (p. 84). However, children have a better chance for acquiring a second language due to the 'critical period' theory, where if a language is introduced at childhood, acquisition will be more likely "L2 acquisition will more likely be complete if begun in childhood than if it does not start until a later age" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 82). In addition, adults tend to be more focused in the purpose of the class than young learners and would want to make the most out of their education. Long (2015) and Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002) agree that adults usually learn a new language with purposes and objectives that might differ from that of a younger learner. Their purposes are usually specific to certain needs, such as being abroad, getting a new job, and so on. Thus, adults need their foreign language classes to be relevant and specific, where those classes are designed to meet their requirements, and bring them closer to their objectives. Therefore, age becomes a crucial factor to consider when teaching EFL.

For the reasons stated above making the distinction between which literary pieces to use with young and adult learners is imperative. Young learners cannot rely entirely on literature to grasp the English language. There needs to be stimulus for them to stay engaged and focused, and that is where picking the right type of literature becomes crucial. Teachers need to keep the children engaged and motivated and invoke their creative thought process to achieve the most of their education. Teaching a second language to young learners needs to be enjoyable, and most importantly, include retainable information that the learners would be able to use while communicating in the English language. Ara (2009) writes that fun activities such as singing, rhyming, and games seem to be the most effective approach when teaching young learners, providing the learners with benefits that go beyond language learning (p. 164). Young learners are usually less focused while

being more energetic than adult learners, thus they require classes to be taught in a manner that is not boring and entices them to focus during class. Brewster et al. (2002) agree on the matter and write about the many benefits of using songs, rhymes, and chants on young learners. Such an approach could be used to introduce, practice, or even revise a foreign language, as well as capture the attention of the students. Pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, and other skills could all be improved through songs, rhymes, and chants (p. 168). Thus, due to young learners needing more incentive to focus and engage during class, teachers need to integrate multiple methods that would make the learning experience more entertaining.

As for adult learners, their attitude towards learning English through literature is influenced by many factors, including their purpose for learning the language, whether their aim is to learn about literature and its history, and deeply dissect it, or if it is used as method to learn the English language. For example, adults, or university students could choose to major in English Literature from a form of interest towards the topic. Adults that choose this path do not expect to master the English language through their major, but only to become more knowledgeable of the culture, and history behind it. Whereas other adults may pursue a degree in English literature for the purpose of exposing themselves to the language, learn more vocabulary, and the use of grammar in written texts. Whatever the purpose might be, literature is a beneficial tool for English learners to develop their proficiency, whilst exploring the history and culture of the language. However, students' attitude towards integration of literature into English classes must be considered. For example, in a study conducted by Ashrafuzzaman, Ahmed and Begum (2021) to learn more about the benefits of using English literature for learning English language, and for also developing the four skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, thirty undergraduate university students in Bangladesh were selected as participants, and it was found that the students seemed to view literature and grammar as parallels, where grammar needs to be learned and properly acquired for the students to fully grasp literary texts. The study found that "another reason for not preferring literature to grammar is that without having the basic grammatical knowledge a learner will face huge difficulties in learning a language if he/she directly switches into literature" (p. 1198). Therefore, this study refers to the importance of choosing a literary piece that is compatible with the learners' four skills, and most importantly their comprehension. Eventually, through picking a suitable literary piece, the students will more than likely witness improvement in their English language, as many of the studies mentioned in this paper have proved.

However, albeit some students had difficulty in the selected literary work, the study carried out by Ashrafuzzaman et. al. (2021) found that:

[A]ll the respondents (n=30) agreed that literature can play significant role in developing language skills. All of them were highly benefitted by practicing literature towards developing their dexterity. They also mentioned that it was enjoyable to learn English language through literature because it didn't create

any pressure to learn (p. 1198).

Furthermore, it is important to keep the opinions of the students in mind when going through English teaching classes, and take notes of their favorite genres, and what they intend to learn from the class. Teachers need to keep an open mind, and a vigilant eye towards all learners, especially adults, as with age, some might feel more hesitant to speak a foreign language if they have not adapted to it yet. Thus, it is vital for a teacher to be able to adapt to their students' background and needs, as their contribution is what defines the students' understanding of both, literature, and the English language in general. Ghazali et al. (2009) emphasize this point and mention that teachers play a major role in shaping their students' attitudes and behaviors when learning a foreign language, or any subject for that matter (p. 55). Thus, it is important for teachers to always be equipped with all the necessary skills, and knowledge that would allow them to bring the most benefit to the learners. Proper training, and knowledge needs to be given to the teachers before using any teaching approach, and proper assessment of the students always needs to be made. By following the proper approaches, and applying different literary texts from different authors that also interest the students, the teachers will be able to keep students engaged, and interested, making them more eager to learn, and participate.

## **CONCLUSION**

Literature is vital in English teaching, and the use of proper literary texts is proven to aid students in developing their language skills, as well as their knowledge of other cultures that might appear in the texts. It is important for the teacher to introduce the culture and historical background of each literary text they provide to their students, to give them a better meaning of the texts and provide the students with a better understanding of how the language is used in each specific piece of literature, as well as how it differentiates from one period to another. Moreover, to develop a better sense of understanding the literature, it is recommended that teachers use authors from various backgrounds, preferably ones that can be relatable to the students, and use hybridity in their works, to provide the full picture of English in global literature rather than only American and British. Foreign students need to have proper access to literature and the teacher needs to be able to provide them with the information and knowledge they need depending on their level, as well as geographical background, and English background, and in a more complete sense, they need to have ELF awareness. It is necessary to provide the students with a wide selection of literature that meets their interests, as doing so will bring more engagement to the class and would motivate the students to learn about the subject matter. Thus, the teacher's role is a significant one, that either engages the students in learning, or completely demotivates them. That is why teachers need to be aware of the students' needs, and what genres to use in classes, without dismissing the other facets of English teaching such as grammar, vocab, syntax, and such.

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