

Three Approaches to Teach English through Literature: Students' Perceptions in the English Language and Teaching

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Abstract

Literature is appreciated as a prolific material to be used in a language classroom for a long time. As combining literature with language teaching provides students with competences and awareness of foreign language and culture, scholars of foreign language teaching presents three models to use literature effectively in the language classroom, namely, personal enrichment, language-based approach, and literature as content. This study examines these three approaches in terms of their advantages and challenges and present English Language Teaching (ELT) students' perceptions. The participants of this study were 42 third-grade students of the ELT Department, who took Language and Literature Teaching course at Yozgat Bozok University. Students were provided with methodological assumptions, selection and organization of materials, lesson plan samples, and advantages and disadvantages of each approach during a five-week course period. At the end of the course, an online questionnaire was conducted to collect the data and one open-ended question was asked to investigate the students' preferences in detail. The results of the questionnaire show that more than half of the participants would prefer literature for personal enrichment as a teaching approach in the language classroom as they believed it to be more motivating than language-based approach and content-based approach to increase learners' participation and interaction. Participants of this study as future teachers of English suggest that language learners would be more willing to take part in classroom activities if they are given chances to talk about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences through integrating literature into language teaching.

Keywords: education; English as a foreign language; literature; personal enrichment; teaching English

1. Introduction

Using a literary text in the language classroom is widely acknowledged as a rich and motivating material to teach and learn a foreign language. Many critics and scholars enrich our perspective by providing the benefits of using literature in the language classroom. Recognizing the importance of integrating literature into language classrooms, this paper tries to map out the approaches to teaching English through literature.

Collie and Slater (1987) examine the question “Why should we use literature in the language classroom?” under the four titles: valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement. Additionally, Maley (1989, p.12) lists some other factors, which make insightful contributions to help us understand why to use literature with language learners by positing features of literary texts “universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity.” By the same token, Violetta-Irene (2015, p. 75) offers three main criteria to justify literature as a teaching tool in the English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts: “the linguistic criterion, the methodological criterion, and the motivational criterion.” The linguistic criterion focuses its argument on the assumption that literature is a rich source including authentic language use and variety of language styles. With their multiple interpretations, literary texts increase interaction among the learners, which constitutes the primary goal of the methodological criterion. And finally, the motivational criterion places emphasis on the suggestion that by opening a window into the world of the writers, literary texts motivate learners to share their feelings.

In light of the proven benefits of literature, this current paper examines three possible approaches pinpointed by Lazar (2009): Personal Enrichment, Language-Based Approach, and Literature as Content.

1.1 Personal enrichment

The main goal of the personal enrichment method is to encourage students to talk and discuss about their own feelings and experiences. Teachers should consider the material selection procedure critically when applying this method as it is important to select texts which are in line with learners’ age and interests. Thus, it is highly significant for a teacher to know his/her students. Teachers might prepare a survey to examine the students’ interests, or they might provide students with options with multiple texts to let them select the text to study. Group work or pair work might be applied in the classroom activities to be used with the personal enrichment method to increase students’ motivation when they are not willing to share their opinion.

As the personal involvement is tolerably demanded in this method, classroom activities should encourage interaction and discussion. The classroom activities should be centered on speaking and writing skills. Poems can be used to relate their themes and topics with students’ own life and experiences, and rewriting and critical discussion sections will be suggestive to increase students’ participation.

1.2 Language-based approach

The language-based approach focuses its methodological assumptions on the integration of language and literature regarding stylistic method. Thus, the literary text, itself, is not the subject matter; instead, it is used as a tool for language practice. Lazar (2009, p.27) explains that “stylistics involves the close study of the linguistic features of a text in order to arrive at an understanding of how the meanings of the text are transmitted“. One of the concerns of this approach is to make students interpret the literary text and drive them to make critical judgements.

For the language-based activities to use with literature, teachers might give a literary text to the students and let them read it. Then, the teacher provides three summaries of the text and asks students to choose the best summary. Also, poems can be used for reading materials and teachers might ask students to write a title for a poem, or give a set of titles to make students choose the most appropriate ones. Or, teachers might use a descriptive piece of a novel or a short story in which all the adjectives are removed so that students can write their version of descriptions by filling in the gaps with adjectives.

1.3 Literature as content

In the literature as content method, the primary focus is on the text, itself regarding the content rather than the language. Thus, prior knowledge about the text such as the literary movements they belong to, the biography of the writer, and political background should be given to the students before they start examining the text. The dilemma arisen here is that literature teachers might be more appropriate for this method to use with literature rather than a language teacher. Also, some critics argue that it is more appealing to students who have a special interest in literature.

In considering the material selection, teachers should choose the texts according to students' linguistic levels as linguistically difficult texts might be demotivating for students. On the other hand, literature as content method would be beneficial in terms of increasing students' cognitive and intercultural skills by providing them with a variety of cultural source if the teacher involves background information and arrange the in-class activities considering students' interests.

As the interconnection of language and literature is acknowledged and examined in the field of language education and many language methods have been developed since the acceptance of literature as a teaching tool. By revealing effective classroom practices and teaching strategies, Brumfit (1985, 1991) paved the way for practitioners to conduct a literary text in the language classroom. Also, a review of the literature provides us with many enlightening studies (Can & Tezcan, 2021; Richards, 2017; Violetta-Irene, 2015; Keshavarzi, 2012; Yeasmin et al., 2011; Hişmanoğlu, 2005; Floris, 2004) that build a greater awareness of using literature in language teaching. Emphasizing the use of literary texts for promoting not only the language skills but also the cultural and cognitive skills of language learners, these studies offer a perspective on how literature is used effectively by applying different approaches regarding methodological goals. Thus, teachers considering the needs of their students can choose any approach or approaches that the scholars have suggested.

2. Methods

As combining literature with language teaching provides students with competences and awareness of foreign language and culture, scholars of foreign language teaching presents three models to use literature effectively in the language classroom:

- personal enrichment
- language-based approach
- literature as content

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of ELT students about three approaches to teaching English through literature. With the intent of achieving the aim of the study, a case study was used as a research design. A case study is suitable for engaging students actively in the learning and searching process as Roell (2019, p. 24) puts it “Case studies are also useful for training learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) because to find a solution to a case study, the learners need to apply linguistic skills in combination with analytical and/ or interpersonal skills“.

The study was conducted for 7 weeks during the Language and Literature Teaching Course, a two-credit course compulsory for second-year students in the English Language and Teaching (ELT) Department at Yozgat Bozok University in Turkey. Participants of the study were 42 second-year ELT students who enrolled in the course.

Students were provided with methodological assumptions, selection and organization of materials, lesson plan samples, and advantages and disadvantages of each approach during a seven-week course period. After examining each approach, students were asked to prepare three different lesson plans and bring the literary texts appropriate to the three approaches. Students discuss the appropriateness of the literary texts and adaptation of the lesson plans to the approaches.

At the end of the term an online questionnaire designed on Google Forms was conducted to collect the data. The questionnaire was divided into 3 parts. In the first part, students were asked about their preferences regarding three approaches. The second part was designed to understand to what extent they agree upon the statements about the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. And finally, one open-ended question was asked to investigate students’ reasons of preferences.

Data gathered from the questionnaire was entered in SPSS.27 and descriptive statistics were analysed for each item. For the analysis of the qualitative data, the researcher read the responses several times and by using inductive coding method and a ground-up approach, the researcher aimed at achieving non-preconceived codes from the data. First step was to group the themes and then codes were developed from the themes gathered from the data.

3. Results and Discussion

The first question of the questionnaire was about the students’ preferences on the use of three models to teach English language through literature and Tab. 1 shows the means of each approach.

Table 1: Mean of three approaches

Language-based approach	14	33%
Literature as content	4	9%
Literature for personal enrichment	24	57%

More than half of the students preferred the personal enrichment model to use with literature in language teaching while the least preferred model is the literature as content. For the

second part of the questionnaire a 5-point Likert scale was used (1.Strongly agree 2.Agree 3.Neutral 4.Disagree 5.Strongly disagree).

Examining the descriptive statistics of models in Tab. 2, we can come to the conclusion that students have chosen the personal enrichment method as they find it more motivating than the other two models. More to the point, Tab. 2 shows us the most important features of the models according to the students. Q, Q2, and Q3 refer, respectively, “Language-based approach provides useful exposure to grammar and vocabulary”, “Students are exposed to a wide range of authentic materials in literature as content approach”, and “Personal enrichment involves learner as a whole person so it is highly motivating”. The language-based is founded beneficial as it contributes to students’ grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and the literature as content is believed to be useful in terms of its authenticity.

Table 2: The descriptive statistics of the benefits of three approaches

		approaches	Q1	Q2	Q3
N	Valid	42	42	42	42
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		2,25	1,58	1,66	1,54
Std. Deviation		,94	,65	,63	,58

Students were asked about their opinions on each model regarding their challenges to use with language learners. Tab. 3 might help us to understand why literature as content is the least preferred approach by the participants. Q4, Q5, Q6 and Q7 refer to the following statements:

“Literature as content is only successful when used with learners who have a specialist interest in the study of literature.”

“Texts are so remote from the students’ own experience that they are unable to respond meaningfully in literature for personal enrichment.”

“Material is very difficult linguistically to use with literature as content.”

“A language-based approach is demotivating for language learners.”

Table 3: The descriptive statistics of the disadvantages of three approaches

		Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
N	Valid	42	42	42	42
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		3,25	2,50	3,00	2,87
Std. Deviation		1,15	1,28	1,10	1,11

Students agree with the statement that “Literature as content is only successful when used with learners who have a specialist interest in the study of literature”, which explains us that this model might be ineffective; or classroom activities and tasks used with literature as

content model might be boring for the students if they are not interested in literature as this model values the context rather than the language. On the other hand, students do not consider literary texts as linguistically difficult materials. Moreover, language-based is not founded challenging in terms of motivational issues.

In an attempt to get details about students' preferences, an open-ended question was added at the end of the questionnaire. By this way, students were able to explain and provide the reasons of their preferences. Students were asked to fill in the following sentence:

"As an EFL teacher I would prefer ... approach because"

As the numbers in the quantitative data show us that personal enrichment has the highest mean, in a similar vein, words in the qualitative data explain the details of students' choices of approaches. Tab. 4. shows the themes and codes developed from the qualitative data.

Table 3: The disadvantages of each approach

Themes	Codes
Literature for personal enrichment	Motivating Interaction Participation Expressing feelings
Language-based approach	Language awareness Language skills Interpretation skills Grammar Vocabulary

Students' responses, as shown below, help us to conclude that personal enrichment model is considered the most motivating model to increase language learners' participation and promote interaction.

"Personal enrichment because it supports the personal developments of students. On the other hand they are able to improve language skills."

"Literature for personal enrichment/ I want my students to express their ideas and feelings. I believe that this would be motivating for them."

"Literature for personal enrichment - students need to be motivated and this can be ensured by literature for personal enrichment."

"Literature for personal enrichment because this approach helps students to better understand and interpret literature as it appeals to their emotions and imaginary world."

"I would prefer literature for personal enrichment. It is so important to choose a topic that every student would like to participate."

"I would prefer Literature for personal enrichment because, I would try to create a class in which students can easily express themselves. This is a big problem in Turkey. Most of the students are shy and cannot express themselves easily. But, I think students can handle with that problem thanks to the literature for personal enrichment."

“Literature for personal enrichment because incorporating students' own experiences and thoughts into the lesson will motivate them and accelerate their acquisition.”

“Literature for personal enrichment because it is motivating for students as it values their feelings.”

On the other hand, some students stated that they preferred language-based as it is more effective to teach language skills, grammar and vocabulary.

“A language based or personal enrichment. Because while children learning language, they improve their language knowledge.”

“Language based approach. I want my students to build the languages skills rather than focusing on the literary skills.”

“A language based approach, because students will gain language skills and increase their reading comprehension by studying on literary texts.”

“Language based approach because it develops both language skills and literary skills.”

“A language based approach because it increase students' general language awarenes and help students to make meaningful interpretations. Also, they learn grammar and vocabulary.”

“Language based approach because this approach is good for the language awareness.”

We can infer that these students who preferred language-based consider improving learners' linguistics skills more important than students' participation and interaction. The significant point to underline here is that none of the students preferred content-based approach. This might be because of the fact that content-based approach is believed to be successful when used with students who have a special interest in literature.

4. Conclusion

Literary texts are approved to be authentic teaching materials in language classrooms. Thus, they are used by many language teachers as additional materials to course books in an attempt to widen students' language and cultural awareness. However, the literature review provides little knowledge about pre-service teachers' opinions about using literary texts to teach a foreign language. Tehan et al. (2015) investigated the opinions of students regarding the importance and the place of literature in a language class and found that literature is believed to be a significant source of culture and it should be a mandatory course; however, students are unable to explain ways of benefitting the literary text in a language classroom. Keeping these findings provided by the previous research in mind, the researcher of the current study applied a case study for the aim of, first, acquainting students with the benefits and challenges of using literary texts, and secondly, presenting three models to use with literature. The purpose of the study was to investigate the student' preferences after they were introduced to three models in terms of methodological assumptions, materials, lesson plan samples, and classroom activities during a seven-week period.

Examining the findings gathered by a 5-point Likert scale, we understand to what extent students agree upon each approach's benefits and challenges. More than half of the students in this study preferred the personal enrichment model. According to the results of the scale, literature as content is the least preferred approach while none of the students stated this approach for the filling-in question asked at the end of the questionnaire. From the same token, Tasneen (2010) found in his study that language teachers and students considered literature a valuable teaching material although they thought that cultural unfamiliarity and the linguistic level of the literary text might be a problem for language learners.

The filling-in question gives us the reasons for students' choices of approaches. Briefly, we can conclude that personal enrichment increases interaction and participation and motivates shy students by giving them opportunities to express their feelings. Iversen et al (2001), pointing out the contribution of studying the literary text to personal growth, emphasize the development of students' interpretation and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, the language-based approach is considered effective in increasing learners' grammar and vocabulary knowledge while it values language skills over literary skills. As Naji et al. (p.194) put it clearly "an over emphasis on language forms and language learning through literature may reduce emotional involvement and limit opportunities for personal growth", we might consciously recommend to language teachers balance improving language learners' linguistic skills and cultural and interpretative skills.

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