

Literature in Language Teaching: What, Why and How?

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Abstract- This paper addresses some of the major issues related to the teaching of literature as a specialist subject and as a language teaching resource. The discussion includes an overview of the term literature, the possible reasons for using literature in language teaching and what it means to go beyond the traditional term of literature in the context of language education. Finally, some of the approaches to the teaching of literature have been discussed.

Key words: Literature, Language Teaching, Literature with a small 'l', Process-based and Product-based approaches.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature was an integral part of second and foreign language teaching in the 'Classical Humanist' view of education, where an understanding of the high culture expressed in the sophisticated language of literature was considered more important than communicative competence. Maley in 1989 [8] claimed that literature became insignificant when:

- The structuralist approach tended to exclude literature except in the form of simplified readers, and the utilitarian bias of the communicative approach deflected attention away from anything, which did not seem to have a practical purpose.
- The structuralists focused on linguistic form rather than creative use of language through the reading of literary/imaginative texts. Although, the so called innovative approaches with a functional focus continue to question the role of literature in language courses, literature continues to have a role in language teaching in many former British colonies. However, literature has to be redefined or extended in order to make it accessible in terms of texts and teaching methods for language learners.

II. MODERN DEFINITIONS OF LITERATURE

Scholars such as [1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11] consider the traditional definition of literature (as a canon of texts in a chronological order) as being rigid, elitist and unrepresentative however, more recent

definitions include the writer, reader and the text. Louise Rosenblatt in 1938 [13] highlighted the exploratory nature of literature in the following comment:

- The reader may explore his own nature, become aware of potentialities, acquire clear perspective; develop aims and a sense of direction.

In its broadest sense, literature is not restricted to print materials alone, but includes cartoons, films, songs, characters and stories (to appeal to learners' imagination. Maley and Duff in 1989 [6] made the following observation:

- There is nothing sacred about a literary text. All such texts were at some time written down, rearranged, scratched out, torn up, revised, misprinted, and so on. Anyone doubting this should simply look at any well-known writer's notebook or manuscript.

According to McRae [11], the definition of literature should include texts like newspaper headlines, advertisements, jingles, songs and cartoons. Cook [3] and Mao Sihui [9] make a case for imaginative texts or representational materials in language teaching.

It is evident that a narrow definition of literature is likely to restrict the ways in which literary texts are selected, organized and studied in institutions. The traditional approach to the study of literature with a focus on plot, character and theme is being complemented with other approaches in the present day context. Based on the ideas discussed here, the major reasons for using literature in language education are given in the following section.

III. REASONS FOR USING LITERATURE

Teaching literature in ESL since the 1980s has changed in terms of texts, approaches and even the language level of learners. The argument that only advanced students can cope with literature has become untenable with the emergence of new materials.