



Article History

Submission : January 08, 2022

Revision : January 25, 2022

Acceptance : February 08, 2022

Literature in Language Syllabus: Space and Contributions

Lok Raj Regmi

Faculty of Education

Tribhuvan University

Abstract

This study explores the place of literature in language syllabus and analyzes how literature supports language enrichment, extensive reading and critical reading. Literature for language enrichment describes how literature supports the development of language skills in students. Literature for extensive reading deals with how literature supports the development of inferential and literary skills. Likewise, literature for critical reading describes how literature contributes to the development of intellectual skills in students. For this, theoretical and empirical studies have been consulted. Similarly, five teachers teaching English language/literature at university level as primary sources have been interviewed to collect data. The data collected from interviews have been discussed under four different themes. The study concludes that literature occupies an important space in language syllabus as literature is pedagogically, linguistically and aesthetically embedded. Literature in language syllabus is relevant to teach language skills, for example, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The study shows that literature provides the ground to teach literary and inferential skills: commenting, appreciating, characterizing, finding clues, developing supporting details, drawing conclusion. In addition, literature supports to teach intellectual skills: analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting using literary criticism.

Keywords: literature, language enrichment, language syllabus, extensive reading, critical reading, inferential skills.

Introduction

Literary texts are rich in language use and content. Carefully selected literary texts in language teaching offer language input and exposure through multiple models of creative language. As literature is interactive, evocative, and authentic material to carry out different teaching learning activities, literature is concerned with the development of

better comprehension and widening the horizon of language. Agustín Reyes Torres writes in favour of the extensive use of literature in language syllabus as the reading of literature improves students' command of language engaging them in different innovative activities (9). As a resource of language teaching, literature presents how language and context are interwoven. Reading literature encourages students to draw the literal interpretation of the texts as well as to decipher the meaning in context or to elicit the implied meaning of the texts. Won Kim views that literary texts present a series of language patterns in context and such use of language as its finest level motivates the students to search for multiple meanings through discussions and group work (6). In addition, literature courses in language teaching support students to draw on their own language, promote cultural competence, life experiences in them, and lead them to literary appreciation. Mingshui is of the opinion that (multicultural) literature in language curriculum leads students from information to empowerment, consequently, they develop the ability to identify, critically analyze and to solve problems related to class, culture and other differences (qtd in Fernandes and Alsaeed 128). Literary texts of diverse themes facilitate language teaching and learning to extensive reading through their beautiful illustrations of subject matter and high quality rhetoric. Yesemin Kirkgoz rightly says that exploring literature leads students to creative writing in which students express their imagination, develop advanced language proficiency, and the skill of aesthetic reading (401).

However, literature in language teaching has been facing several ups and downs from history to date. The advent of structural approach to language teaching showed a strong resentment about the inclusion of literature in language teaching and this historical attempt invited the language literature contestation that remained sharp for several years. As mentioned in Ram Ashish Giri, the pleaders of structural approach argued that literature is useless in meeting students' academic and/or occupational goals (36). With the changing pace of time, the development of the communicative approach to language teaching has acknowledged literature as a material to foster communicative competence. Moreover, literature has been used to expand the horizon of knowledge in students after the development of content language integrated teaching/learning. But a big chunk of language teachers yet are not free of the historical contestation of literature in language teaching and feel problematic, have confusion about the inclusion of literature in language syllabus. Instead of teaching language through the wider use of literary texts, they treat literature as a complementary material only to other ordinary materials or informative texts. In this context, Alan Maley puts forward the argument that the role of literature in language teaching remains contentious because of the differences in interpretation of the precise nature of that role (180). Maley has shown the role of literature as 'a resource,' and as 'a subject' and such treatment indicates that they are two separate pedagogical practices. The present status of literature in language teaching, to some extent, resembles what Maley argued around twenty years ago. It shows that literature in language teaching still occupies the space of handmaiden. In other words, the stakeholders of language teaching have not widely accepted literature as a valuable material to teach language skills and content knowledge. The present study attempts to explore and analyze the space and contribution of literature in language syllabus.

Literature Review

The use of a wide range of styles, varieties of utterances, registers, and rich content of literature contribute to language teaching for linguistic and aesthetic purpose. Lazar argues that literature in language syllabuses has been serving as an authentic and a motivating material for language development. Students enjoy reading literature and interpret it critically and creatively (14). The reading of literature allows students to do collaborative and innovative tasks. Ronald Carter and Michael Long are of the opinion that literature in language teaching encourages students to engage in many language-based and critical response -based exercises by stimulating greater interest as a legitimate and valuable resource (qtd. in Baba 48). In contrast to this view, Geoff Hall argues that it is problematic to integrate language and literature since they are treated separately in the classroom. He further claims that literariness is biased when the focus of teaching learning is language, and linguistic elements are underplayed when the focus is literary understanding (47).

Literature is a part of culture, the site of social harmony and difference. Reading literature as the study of Malin Oshaug Stavik puts it, makes students acquainted with new values and perspectives that help them get a better understanding of other cultures (117).

Literature in language syllabus can foster language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Hulya Kucukoglu and Arda Arikan (1718); Rashad Mohammed Areqi (20) argue that the teaching learning of literature treats students as a part of literary texts and acquaints in them the notion of culture, enriches vocabulary, speech sounds, and language functions. Their study reveals that literature acts as a powerful agent by developing students' language proficiency. Likewise, the study of Gaus Azam Chowdhury and Anjum Mishu concludes that literary texts facilitate to design communicative tasks: discussions, pair and group work, read discuss and share. The study regards the brain of students as a social organism and literary texts always keep their brain functional by engaging them in different learning activities (261).

Literature in language teaching widens students' horizon of knowledge by involving them in different activities of literary understanding. Moreover, literature is aesthetically valued material and can support language teaching and learning for aesthetic purpose. Following the same vein, Rosenblatt (1994) argues that literary texts engage students in the process of meaning construction through efferent reading (reading for literal interpretation) and aesthetic reading (reading for critical purpose) using transaction (qtd. in Stavik 22). She further declares that they are two separate stances of reading or two extremes of the continuum. It is further justified by the study of Marry L. Mereedi that transactional literature discussion is a way which EFL teachers can scaffold the strategies to adopt aesthetic instruction that encourages students for critical readings (103).

After observing the situation of literature and language teaching for two decades, Ronald Carter has presented his own synthesis that the notion of literature in language teaching is relative and literature is seen as a means of introducing learners to such burning issues of our world by initiating them in the process of defining themselves through contact with others' experience (3). His report further reveals that

the role of literature in language teaching has been expanded to extensive and critical readings. The study of Lestari Setyowati and Sony Sukmawan further supports the aforementioned interpretation of Carter. Their study claims that language teaching and literary appreciation can be integrated for the purpose of extensive reading but they do not mention the procedures (134). Likewise, the studies of Saroja Dhanapal (2008); Suzanne Shen Choo (2012); Naraini Ahmad Shukri and Jayakaran Mukundan (2015) have concluded literature as a means to develop critical thinking ability in students. Their studies do not directly discuss the classroom procedures using primary data. The aforementioned studies have shown less concern on how literature serves language development, extensive readings and critical readings nor have they discussed the relationship among these steps of reading literature. This study presents how literature contributes to carry out different teaching learning activities for language enrichment, literary appreciation and critical readings, and also highlights the relationship among them.

Methodology

This study is based on descriptive/ analytical research design under qualitative approach. The theoretical as well as empirical works were used to fulfill the purpose of the study. The major authors of literature in language teaching have been consulted in order to build up the theory. They are Lazar (1993), Maley (2001), Carter (2007), Rosenblatt (1994), Hall (2005). Likewise, the empirical works of Irene (2015), Soomro (2017), Baba (2008), Stavik (2015), Mereedi (2013), Setyowati and Sukmawan (2018), Choo (2012), and Shukri and Mukundan (2015) have also been used. As a primary source of data, five informants teaching English language and literature for more than ten years at university level have been selected. The data are collected via written interviews with selected informants. For this, the interview guideline has been prepared (See in Appendix). Thematic network has been used for analyzing the collected data. Accordingly, the data have been codified, categorized and analyzed under each theme qualitatively.

Results and Discussions

The collected responses (data) from interviews have been discussed under the following four themes.

The Space of Literature in Language Syllabus

Literature in language teaching faced vicissitude in the past. There had been arguments in favor and against the inclusion of literature in language teaching. This sub-section aims at finding out the place of literature in language syllabus. In item 1, the informants responded in affirmative:

Yes, undoubtedly. Literature has space in language syllabus. The beauty of language syllabus is diversity. Literature as a creative sample of language encourages students to a wider range of language practices. It is included in language syllabus in order to teach different language items and skills although some pleaders are reluctant about the use of literature in language syllabus.

Literature is the use of language, students enjoy reading it as an important part of language teaching and learning. It has been accepted as a material to teach skills and content.

Majority of the informants responded that literature has space in language teaching as literature is one of the manifestations of language. According to them, literature is a useful resource to teach language skills and other aspects of language, for example, vocabulary, speech sounds and language functions. Literature is an expression of creative language, it is motivating and interesting. In language syllabus, literature is supportive to teach and learn meaningful communication and elaborated content. Literary texts of diverse samples of language use and themes expose students to a wider range of language practices and ample textual opportunities to analyze and interpret.

It reveals that literature has important space in language syllabus. In response to the next issue connected with item 1, the majority of the informants presented their views, “No, this is simply a superficial view. Literature provides space for stylistic analysis, engages students in creative tasks and discussions for criticality.” Majority of the informants negated the views of some ELT experts about the futile and problematic role of literature in language syllabus. The informants pleaded that literature is psychologically motivating, linguistically and culturally rich and aesthetically loaded construct. Literary texts expose students to language-based activities and promote greater tolerance for cultural differences, and are useful for aesthetic recreation. It proves that literature serves language syllabus from linguistic, cultural, aesthetic and pedagogic point of view. This interpretation is similar to Irene (2015); Mart (2017); and Healy (qtd in Soomro et al 67) who argue that literary texts provide students opportunities to perceive aesthetic recreation, the ground for linguistic/ stylistic analysis, and engage students in meaningful activities/ interactions. However, one of the informants responded, “Yes, I agree with some of the ELT experts to some extent. Some literary texts, particularly some poems and experimental fictions can have the sort of structural complexities. It depends upon the selection of literary texts.”

All literary texts do not contribute to language teaching equally. Some texts of poems and classics, experimental texts do have nominal contribution to students’ proficiency and skills. However, wisely selected literary texts contribute a lot to language development in students. It shows that the proper selection of literary texts makes the contribution of literature to language teaching more relevant.

Literature for Language Enrichment

The informants in item 2 expressed their views, “Literature sharpens students’ proficiency of language, it results in the proficiency of listening, speaking, reading and writing.” One of the participants shared his experiences with evidence, “Even at the level of Masters, I have witnessed the students, who were incompetent in language when they joined the literature programme, became skilled speakers, presenters at the completion of semesters.” The informants were affirmative about the roles of literature in sharpening students’ language proficiency and argued that such access to language manifests in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The informants expressed their views on how literature supports the teaching

and learning of the aforementioned skills. They responded their views in common:

Literary texts, while teaching and learning of listening and speaking, facilitate to carry out the activities: predicting, comprehending, arguing, making a gist, describing, discussing; for reading, they support to carry out the activities: reading comprehension, compare and contrast, unscrambling, summarizing, paraphrasing, commenting, appreciating, finding clues, making conclusions; and in writing: analyzing, interpreting, critically appreciating, creative writing.

Majority of the informants viewed that the literary texts such as poems, dramas, essays, and fictions contribute to design and carryout the activities for language enrichment/ language development, particularly in fostering students' language skills. While teaching in classroom, the teacher encourages students to listen to the text of literature, for example, a poem or certain part(s) of long text and asks them to predict the substance of the text, to comprehend the questions, to describe the main message of the text or to explore and describe the implied meaning of the text.

Students listen to their teacher and guess the theme of the text, answer the questions either given by a teacher or mentioned in the text, describe the theme of the text, search for the meaning in context. They can argue in favour or against the statement found in the text. Likewise, the teacher ask students to read the text and do the activities: comprehend the textual questions, develop the literal interpretation of the text, compare and contrast the ideas, arrange the events of drama or fiction in order, paraphrase and narrate the events of the text, comment and appreciate the text, discuss and justify the theme and/ or title of the text. Students read and answer the textual questions, develop literal interpretation of the text on the basis of these concepts/ information. They compare and contrast the issues/ ideas existing in the text, unscramble the events, paraphrase the text in simple versions. They appreciate or comment on the text on the basis of language, diction, message and style. Similarly, students critically appreciate the text, interpret it and develop creative writing and free writing as activities in writing skills. These discussions lead to the conclusion that literature contributes to language development in students by engaging them in the activities: predicting, making a gist, arguing and analyzing, commenting and critically appreciating, analyzing and interpreting, free and creative writing. These activities ultimately develop students' proficiency, improve their gripping of language and such access to language is manifested through speaking, reading and writing.

Whether literature in language syllabus contributes equally to teach all language skills was the next issue for discussion. Majority of the informants presented their views, "No, all genres do not serve equally to teach each language skill. Poetry, for example, is useful to teach listening; one-act play and short stories for speaking; essay, poem and short stories for reading, and fiction, drama for writing." The informants argued that all genres are not equally effective to teach each language skills. Particular genres are more effective to teach specific skills. They categorically presented their experiences, for example, poetry and short stories because of their average length contributes better to teach listening; drama and short stories because of their essential quality, for example, interaction and narration contribute more effectively to teach speaking to develop oral performance and the skill of order in students; essay, poems and fictions serve reading;

and long texts, for example, novels and dramas for writing. However, one of the informants showed reluctance about the contribution of poetry to language development. The discussions lead to the conclusion that particular genres of literature have better efficacy to teach specific skills although every text can have more or less contribution.

In response to the role of literature in language teaching, either as a first hand material or an ancillary to non-literary material, the informants shared their experiences, "Literature in language teaching should not be used as a complementary to ordinary materials because literature has its own value like other materials. Literary texts arouse learners' interest in language and literature." Majority of them pleaded that the role of literature in language teaching is not ancillary to non-literary materials, literature stands as an autonomous construct. Its role is to serve the language teaching. Two of the informants responded, "Literature should be used as a first hand material in language teaching. It cannot be accompanied with other non-literary materials to teach language." According to them, the focus should be language. Language is a social/ cultural construct and literature is the best road to acquire and develop language. With the help of this discussion, it is interpreted that literature is an integral part of language teaching.

Literature for Extensive Reading

Whether literature in language syllabus contributes to extensive reading is the issue discussed in this subsection. The informants expressed their views:

Unlike other materials in language teaching, literature opens a door to an infinite world of human conditions, burning issues, other variegated ideas, and the use of life-like interactions. The texts prescribed in the syllabus help students to develop their literary appreciation, skill to express their speculation, students are likely to analyze the themes and titles of literary texts, figures of speech, registers and dictions, style. They can develop supporting details. It is through extensive reading.

Majority of the informants shared their experiences that literary texts are rich in content, they include variegated world ideas. The texts of drama and novel with large length and elaborated subject matters are useful for extensive readings.

Literary texts expand students' horizon of knowledge and provide students with ample opportunities for literary appreciation. While appreciating literary texts, students analyze the registers and dictions, metaphors, and other figures of speech, describe the styles, for example, narrative, meditative, communicative, aloof, flash back, intrusive and un-intrusive. Students can sketch the characteristics, explain the context of the text and decipher the implied meaning, analyze the themes and justify the titles of literary texts. In this practice, students perceive the facts and gather the information of the texts as well as elaborate them, analyze them using their own perspectives. They accomplish such tasks without applying any theories of literary criticism. They develop their own perspectives and appreciate/analyze the literary texts. One of the informants shared his experiences, "The practice of literary appreciation instigates students to speak, to share their ideas although it can be limited, students begin to think from their own concepts." It is interpreted that literary texts, along with contributing to language enrichment, support extensive reading. This practice is the development of conceptualization of the text.

Literature for Critical Reading

How far literature contributes to critical readings in students is another issue discussed in this study. The informants shared their views:

Of course, we teach. Literature is aesthetically embedded, it is an intellectually loaded construct. The difference between literary and non-literary material, is the issue of eminence, the purpose of writing, whether intellectual or others.

Literary texts are real life texts, have the live interactions of human life and the issues related to it. It has the quality of aesthetic recreation.

One of the informants gave evidence from ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ and from ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ on how students analyze the aesthetics existing in them. He further viewed, “Critical reading is a part of the job that literature in language teaching serves. It enables students’ judgemental capacity.”

Majority of the informants presented their views that literature serves critical readings or literature serves for aesthetic purpose. Literature consists of such intellectual value or literature is written for academic/ intellectual purpose. This is what other disciplines do not have. Such quality of literature leads students to the practice of critical reading. It is further justified by the views of one of the informants. According to this practice, students explore the issues existed in literary texts and analyze them by applying the approach/es to literary criticism. For example, the aesthetics of segregation in ‘A Raisin in the Sun’, the dominance of unwritten laws to written laws in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” These issues, the plots, themes, titles or the whole text is analyzed using critical lenses, for example, reader response, feminist approach, new criticism, Marxist approach. As literary texts have such intellectual eminence, life like dialogues and rich content, they contribute to critical readings.

In response to the next issue, the informants viewed that literature in language syllabus serves language enrichment, literary appreciation and critical readings. In literature for language enrichment, students develop conceptualization, literal interpretation of the text; in literary appreciation or extensive reading, students comment, appreciate, characterize, justify the title using their own perspectives; in critical reading, students analyze the plots, themes or any existing issues applying literary criticism. It shows that these three constructs/ stances are not separate practices. They are interrelated to each other, for example, literal interpretation is the base of literary appreciation, and critical reading is based on literary appreciation.

In response to the issue whether exploring literature through language and analyzing literary texts applying different approaches to literary criticism leads students to critical thinking skills and creative writing, the informants viewed, “Students due to their continuous exposure to literary texts and exploring them linguistically and analyzing them applying different approaches to literary criticism develops the skills of critical thinking and leads students to creative writing.” Majority of the informants responded that students’ regular exposure and deliberate attempt to literary texts visualizes the images/ symbols used in these texts. It leads them to write a new poem or a drama on similar or different themes. For critical reading, One of the informants expressed, “Students start understanding the matter one by one, they bring out more than depicted in the words using different perspectives, they make value judgement of the things

happening in the text.” While analyzing literary texts applying approaches to literary criticism, students explore the texts as hinted in the theoretical backups of literary criticism, analyze the text on the basis of these theoretical elements, evaluate the devices adopted, synthesize on the basis of discussions, and interpret accordingly.

Conclusion

Literature serves as authentic material in language teaching. It is rich in language use and content. Literary texts in language syllabus contribute to language enrichment, extensive reading (literary appreciation) and critical readings. Literature serves advanced language proficiency in students and it is manifested in language skills. Literary texts contribute to carry out tons of activities to foster listening, speaking, reading and writing in students. Likewise, they serve extensive readings. Students analyze the language, style and the dictions of the literary texts, and they justify the titles, characterize the persons and discuss the themes. They develop literary skills: commenting, appreciating, and exploring the meaning in context. In addition, the teaching and learning of literature fosters students’ inferential skills: finding clues and supporting details, making conclusion. Literature is an aesthetically loaded construct and serves critical readings. Students read the literary texts, analyze them applying relevant approaches to literary criticism. They develop intellectual skills: analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting through critical reading. The study shows that these practices of literature in language syllabus are interrelated to each other, for example, language enrichment is the stage of conceptualizing and the base for extensive reading. Critical reading becomes significant when students connect it to extensive reading.

Works Cited

- Areqi, Rashad Mohammed. “Teaching/ Testing English Literature through an Eclectic Model.” *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2015, pp. 9-21.
- Baba, Wan Kamariah. *An Investigation into Teachers’ and Students’ Attitudes towards Literature and Its Use in ESL Classrooms: A Case Study at a Matriculation Centre in Malaysia*. An unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Leicester, 2008.
- Carter, Ronald. “Literature and Language Teaching 1996-2006: A Review.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2007, pp. 3-13.
- Choo, Suzanne Shen. *Conceptualizing Literature Pedagogy: World, Global, and Cosmopolitan Orientations to Teaching Literature in English*. An unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2012.
- Chowdhury, Gaus Azam and Anjum Mishu. “Literature in EFL: A Gateway to a Successful Teaching-Learning Experience by Stimulating Human Psyche.” *Arab World English Journal*, 2019, pp. 259-276.
- Dhanapal, Saroja. *Cultivating Critical and Creative Thinking Skills through an Integrated Approach to the Teaching of Literary Texts*. An unpublished PhD dissertation, University Putra Malaysia, 2008.
- Fernandes, Lily and Nora Hadi Alsaeed. “Using Literature for the Teaching of English.”

- International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2014, pp. 126-133.
- Giri, Ram Ashish. "Teaching English: The Language-Literature Controversy." *Journal of NELTA*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2001, pp. 36-44.
- Hall, Geof. *Literature in Language Education*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Irene, Koutsompou Violetta. "The Use of Literature in Language Classroom: Methods and Aims." *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015.
- Kim, Won. *Language through Literature: Real Language Experiences in an ESL Adult Classroom*. An unpublished research report, University of British Columbia, 2009.
- Kirkgoz, Yesemin. "Exploring Poems to Promote Language Learners' Creative Writing." *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 158, 2014, pp. 394-401.
- Kucukoglu, Hulya and Arda Arikani. "Prospective English Language Teachers' Views on Literature in their Teacher Education Curriculum and Its Potential Value." *Procedia- Social and Behavioural Science*, vol. 15, 2011, pp. 1718-1722.
- Lazar, Gillian. *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers*. CUP, 1993.
- Maley, Alan. "Literature in the Language Classroom." *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. CUP, 2001.
- Mart, Cagril Tugrul. "Literary Texts: A Means to Promote Language Proficiency of Upper-Intermediate Level EFL Students." *Journal of Education in Black Sea Region*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2017, pp. 44-55.
- Mereedi, Mary L. El. *Transactional Literature Discussions in English Language Teaching: An investigation of Reader Stance and Personal Understanding among Female Arabic-Speaking Learners of English at Qatar University*. An unpublished PhD dissertation, Ohio University, 2013.
- Samad, Adlina, et al. "Teachers' Perceptions of Literature Circle as a Technique to Teach Creative Writing Using Literary Texts." *Research in ELT*. Universiti Teknologi, Malasia, 2008.
- Setyowati, Lestari and Sony Sukmawan. "Writing for Comprehension in a Prose Fiction Analysis: The Students' Voice." *Arab World English Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, pp. 134-145.
- Shukri, Naraini Ahmad and Jayakaran Mukundan. "A Review on Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Literary Texts." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015, pp. 4-9.
- Soomro, Abdul Fattah et al. "Significance of Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom." *International Journal of English and Education*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2017, pp. 65-70.
- Stavik, Malin Oshaug. *Reading Literature in the EFL Classroom. A Research Report*, University of Bergen, 2015.
- Torres, Agustin Reyes. "Literature in the Foreign Language Syllabus: Engaging the Students through Active Learning." *Tejuelo*, no. 15, 2012, pp. 9-16.