

# **Incorporating Literature for Fostering EFL Learners' Literary Competence**

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## **Abstract.**

This study aims to demystify the role of literature in enhancing literary competence (LC) of EFL learners. First of all, the significance of literature and the corresponding role in language teaching explained and the role of reading skill as a basic ability which is required in order to interact with a text is discussed. Next, the reasons behind Integrating Literature in reading process through some recent ideas are elaborated. After that, the concept of critical approaches toward thinking and reading are reviewed. Overall, the findings provide support for facilitative effect of literature on language teaching and specially reading skill.

**Keywords:** critical reading, EFL learners, language teaching, literary competence, literature, reading comprehension

## **1. Literature Importance and Its Correlation with Language.**

Literature is like an unlimited garden which everyone can enter and pluck flowers according to his/her capacity. This is true for individual affairs as well as social aspects. For instance, psychologists have confirmed that reading literary (fiction) increases the ability to detect and understand other people's emotions, a crucial skill in navigating complex social relationship (Bury, 2013). One of the main areas of applying literature is language and its branches such as teaching language. According to many linguists and educationists such as Brumfit (2001), Littlewood (2006), Carter and Long (1990) etc. it is difficult and also not possible to isolate the realm of Literature from Language.

Although the importance of literature and its role in teaching language has changed over times, but never lose color. As Brumfit and Carter (2000) mention whatever view we take of the nature of literature, there is always some phenomenon which is recognized by both educational administrators and the general public, as an appropriate object for study in schools and universities. The use of literature to teach second/foreign languages can be traced back to over one century ago (Erkaya, 2005). "Literature was initially the main source of input for teaching in language classes in the era of Grammar Translation Method but since then it has been dropped down the pedestal" (Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan, 2011, p. 201). "In the middle of the 1980s some practitioners and language scholars resurrected literature as a language learning material after a long period of being neglected" (Maley & Duff, 1991, p. 20). Nowadays the interrelatedness of language teaching and literature cannot be denied and literature represents one of the most recurrent uses of language (Rahimi, 2014).

Actually, there can be different varieties of language in a typical literary text. In other words, language can create its own specific context in the Literature classroom. Littlewood maintains that "the study of literature allows a variety of emphases and perspectives. Only if we become clear about what literature has to offer and what specific pupils require, can we begin to discuss its role and select appropriate methods and texts" (2006, p.183).

It is noteworthy that the impact of literature is not limited to just one aspect of language. Literature is an appropriate ground for practicing listening, reading, writing, speaking and other aspects of language. As Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012) cited literature will increase all language skills because it will develop linguistic knowledge, with its extensive and connotative vocabulary, and also its complex syntax. Similarly, McKay (1982) asserts that, literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax. Likewise, Lao and Krashen (2000) present the results of a comparison between a group of students that read literary texts and a second group that read non-literary texts at a university in Hong Kong. As the consequence, the group who read literary texts showed more improvement in vocabulary and reading (Erkaya, 2005). Learners, who read a lot, tend to be better readers and writers than those who do not read more. Reading literature aloud also make students able to make a good progress in speaking as well as listening ability. Moreover it strengthens students' pronunciations (Noaman, 2013). McKay (1982) argues that literary texts can be ideal for reading skill too. In reading comprehension tasks, literary texts can stimulate interest and closer reading of the texts as well as integrating the four skills practice. He also maintains that literature can improve listening skills. For instance as a listening task, an unheard short story can be read aloud to the students and then teacher can ask students questions about comprehending the story (Khatib & Nasrollahi, 2012).

Widdowson (1975) recommended that the realm of literature and language teaching should be mutually reinforcing each other and not exclusive, if the learners are to be taught to read literature critically and thus, meaningfully. This matter becomes relevant in some situations like Iranian universities and institutions where the majority of students come from educational backgrounds where the mother tongue is the dominant medium of instruction. Therefore, their command of English is not that much adequate to make them enable to read some kind of sophisticated texts independently.

Despite of many advantages of literature in enhancing language teaching, there are some opposite views in this area. Here are some criticisms:

Mckay summarizes the common arguments against using literature in ESL classrooms as follows: “First, since one of our main goals as ESL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. Second, the study of literature will contribute nothing to helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. Finally, literature often reflects a particular cultural perspective; thus, on a conceptual level, it may be quite difficult for students” (1982). Khatib collects some scholar opposite views about literature in language classes, which includes: syntax and lexis difficulty, outdated phonetics and phonology, changed semantics, difficulty in selecting materials appropriate to students, unfamiliarity, inconsistency with academic goals and cultural barriers ( Khatib, et al.,2011).

Despite these negative comments regarding the use of literature in EFL classes, none of these criticisms shows serious barriers toward applying appropriate literary texts in EFL classes. For example, the structural complexity of literary texts can be helpful as a source of practical language practice. So, despite these objections and some ups and downs of literature as one of the materials in EFL classes, nowadays its role in EFL curriculum is evident. Literature is an appropriate ground for practicing all language skills, specifically reading skill. Actually, literature provides the students, with a variety of authentic and attractive texts, which enables them to think critically and partake in social relations that cross national and regional borders, on the condition that it is appropriately selected and cooperated with other tools such as “Literature Circles in EFL” (Bedel, 2011), and it depends mainly on instructor’s proficiency and experiment to collect suitable texts for his/her students.

## **2. Reading Skill and Literature.**

Reading is a complicated process through which the readers try to interact and comprehend what they read. Furthermore, reading is a receptive skill because we usually gain information from the texts we read (Noaman, 2013). It is an important way of gaining information in language learning and it is a basic skill for learners (Shakibaei & Keivan, 2014). Alptekin (2006, p. 494) defined reading as “an interaction of the readers’ text-based and knowledge-based process”. He goes on asserting that “in processing texts, readers combine literal comprehension, based on lower-level cognitive processes of reading such as a lexical access and syntactic parsing with inferential comprehension, based on higher-level cognitive processes such as the text base of comprehension (to understand what the text says) and the situation model of interpretation (to understand what it is about)” (Khatib & Nasrollahi, 2012, p. 242). Reading entails the ability to connect with a text by decoding the language and comprehending the concepts presented (Brumfit & Carter, 2000).

To choose reading materials, there are widely innumerable readable materials for different purposes and stages, but literature has a special place in this area due to the fact that it can provide learners to have good “opportunities for a profound reading” (Harris & Sipy, 1990, p. 80). Literature is often more interesting than the texts found in course books (Erkaya, 2005). In addition, Khatib and Nasrollahi (2012, p. 241) summarize the benefits of literature as an educational material: first of all, literature can be utilized as an authentic source of input in language classes. Second, studying literature and literary texts can provide students with the good opportunity to practice different language skills. Additionally, teaching literature can play as an aid in order to improve all four language skills. Third, literature can make a good progress in cultural awareness, and provides students with a “truly cultural competence”. It can also equip learners with “culturally-apposite pragmatic and socio-psychological components around which to build effective identities which will enable their socialization in the target culture and enhance the effectiveness with which they participate in that culture”. Fourth, literature can enhance interaction. Literary texts are almost rich and prolific in multiple underlying layers of concepts and meaning therefore, can be effectively mined for fruitful class discussions. While literature has the potentiality to play as a tool of a great use in L2 classrooms, its potentiality can be best realized when students are encouraged to develop their personal responses to the reading from multiple aspects and to share them in discussions (Khatib & Nasrollahi, 2012).

## **3. Integrating Literature in Reading Process**

Here are some scholars’ recent ideas on language teaching practices about how literature can integrate and enhance reading skill and encourage students to read interestingly and keep doing it during their whole life. For example, the teachers should animate students toward literature. When the students understand that literature is the foundation of life, and indicates many topics, from friendship to love stories, in which everyone will be definitely involved in his/her own life, so they will be interested in them gradually. Interest in reading, appears to

be a significant motivational variable influencing different aspects of reading performance (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

Among the advantages of using literature in the EFL classroom, authenticity is a pattern which is considered the most. Literature is inherently authentic and provides most authentic input for language learning (Ghosn, 2002; Shrestha, 2008). According to Maley (1989) "literature deals with non-trivial things which are personally relevant to them" (p. 33).

It is obvious that reading can be more attractive if it is cooperated with other tools such as a music which matches with a piece of text, at least in primary stages. Children can be more successful, learning to read if the words of the text are familiar, such as the words to a favorite song (Towell, 2000).

Forming a literature environment, can help reluctant students to become more interested in reading. "A literature environment is a place where there are appropriate books to share" (Alden, Lindquist & Lubkeman, 2003, P 12).

The collection of literary genres (e.g. poetry, story, novel, drama, etc.) that literature proposes is a good source of rich and fruitful language exposure, especially in the ESL classroom (Amer, 2012). If the teachers examine a selection of literary genres during curriculum, there will be some literary texts which every student would be interested in surely.

Teaching grammar, vocabulary, verb tenses and etc according to a literary text, helps students to learn them practically, not in isolation. Input-reach inductive grammar instruction encourages students to view grammar not just as isolated letters, words, and phrases, but also as a meaningful component of contextualized language use. Grammar instruction that draws students' attention to both grammatical forms and their meaning in context mirrors approaches to reading instruction that also focus on these interdependent variables (paesani, 2005)

Literature is a rich source to enable students to partake in social relations that cross national and regional borders. In the era of globalization and cultural globalization, "exposure to literature stimulates learners to reflect on concepts, recognize real life problems, explore causes and solutions, and compare their values and life styles with other cultures". This can provide teachers and learners in the language classroom, with an authentic and rich context for discussion about their cultural values and traditions in contrast with other cultures. This, in turn, may encourage learners to avoid ethnocentrism and develop intercultural competence" (Amer, 2012).

Involving students in selecting their favorite texts, encourage them toward reading. A motivating educator includes students in the decision making about what they read and provide them with literature related activities (Alden et al, 2003).

Literature can be used as a way to critical thinking. Instructors can teach students, habits of questioning, searching for causes and realities, and testing the claims. If the task of reading a text associated with mentioned instructions, it will lead to new levels of understanding and experience. "These techniques can then be transferred to enrich the reading of expository texts as well, and they will encourage dialogue, self-expression, and problem-solving-in short, highly communicative ESL classes" (Gajdusek, 1988, p. 233).

Literature is an appropriate tool for language analysis. "It invites us to go beyond what is said, to what is implied. Since it suggests many ideas with few words, literature is ideal for generating language discussion. Maximum output can often be derived from minimum input" (Khatib, Ranjbar & Fathi, 2012, P 14).

"Literature Circles in EFL" is an effective way toward reading and applying literature in the EFL classrooms. Literature circles are classroom groups made up of students who read a specific book or a piece of literature and perform the tasks that correspond to their roles that change for every meeting. Each of these roles is about different aspects of the text, such as: summary, vocabulary, preparing questions, determining cultural items, focusing on specific passages and making real life connections. The results show that, during the process, the students were highly motivated to read and in that way they improved their interactional skills in English (Bedel, 2011).

So, there are certainly some literature materials which every student would be interested in reading it.

#### **4. Critical Thinking, Critical Reading.**

Critical pedagogy (CP) as an educational theory rooted in critical theory which is a general approach to power and knowledge in social contexts (Freire, 1972; Torres, 1999). "Critical thinking skills are strategies people use to consider and evaluate new ideas" (Fahim, Barjesteh & Vaseghi, 2012, pp. 140). Generally, critical thinking plays an important role in learning programs because it is what learners need in an academic environment as well as their whole life.

By definition, critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it (Paul & Elder, 2006). Woolfolk and Murphy (2001) consider critical thinking the evaluation of results through logical investigation of issues, documents and solutions. Salvin (2006) thinks critical thinking is the ability to make logical decisions about what needs to be performed and what needs to be believed. Johnson (2002) says that critical thinking provides the person the possibility to search the truth in a load of resources and subjects and to reach one's goal i.e. reaching the most comprehensive understanding.

On the other hand, the concept of critical reading is growing along with critical thinking approach too. In a study conducted by Otensoy (2011), the effect of critical reading on students' critical thinking is investigated. "When we read critically, we are always alert, always on the look out for hidden clues, never reliant on the infallibility of the author." (Yudkin, 2006, p. 101). "Critical readers need to have the ability to check their understanding as they move through the text to check their comprehension ability" (Mahboobi & Kaur, 2011, p. 35). Akın, Koray and Tavukçu (2015) believe that the concept of critical reading which is recently put forward as a model approach, especially in education, can be seemed as an attempt of re-reading, which requires handling many concepts affecting our life directly or indirectly with a wider perspective. They argue that Critical reading requires a process of active communication where comments and evaluation on the text are conducted and the text being read, forms the basis for other readings and besides, though the reading process ends, the meaning transmission of the text is still in progress. These qualities which critical reading possesses are quite sufficient for information age.

In spite of the evidence suggesting that the average person tries and struggles so hard to think and read in a critical way, many experts are optimistic about the capacity of people to easily become critical literary readers with suitable, prepared and also appropriate instruction (Halpern, 1998). Kennedy, Fisher and Ennis (1991) mentioned that empirical research suggests that students of all intellectual ability levels and language background can benefit from critical reading instruction and so as from LC as the quick result of it. Similarly, Lewis and Smith (1993) argue that critical reading skills are for everybody to learn and apply them to different genres of reading specifically literary works to explore what are the underlying layers and facts building up the whole story.

In recent decades, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills has mentioned critical reading as one of the learning tools which is so vital and also necessary to make students ready for higher levels of education especially literary fields. In addition, the Common Core State Standards reflect critical reading as a cross-disciplinary skill necessity for college education and also for employment (Paul, 1992).

Moreover, Wiland (2009) in his article called "How to develop literary competence in an English classroom" mentions that this question is too comprehensive and complex to be answered in a single article, as the issues involved tap into the field of text selection, and therefore national curriculum plans and examinations, activities and group dynamics in a class, and the teacher personality monitoring the reading of literary texts in the classroom. Furthermore, he continues that regardless of the mentioned obstacles and barriers, there seem to be some fundamental principles emerging from recent trends in literary theory that might contribute to enhancing the enjoyment of both teachers and learners in a class and thus create a natural basis for the development of LC (Wiland, 2009). Since LC is to be developed in the learner of English, increased awareness on the part of the teachers about reader-response theories seems a sensible first step. He believes that, the function of reader oriented theories is to liberate readers, also untrained young readers in school, from the constraints sometimes implicit in other literary theories. "Without this theoretical back up we might be more reluctant to give up the traditional text-oriented stand that is still favored by many teachers" (Wiland, 2009, p. 1)

According to Wiland not only theories are necessary to develop LC. Research on how foreign language learners actually respond to literature, and poetry particularly, may shed light on what approaches work well with learners of English and thus increase motivation for reading English, a necessary step to develop LC. Therefore, he continued the discussion about theory by some response samples from his own research, Poetry: Prima Vista. Reader-Response Research on Poetry in a Foreign Language Context, including suggestions about approaches and procedures in the classroom. He tried to make connections between the theories for all age groups, and the teaching of literature generally in the foreign language classroom.

## **5. Literary Competence: Some Empirical Studies.**

### **5.1. ESL Context**

At the onset of the rise of New Criticism in the 1930s and 40s, the formal dimensions of literary works accompanied by all its structure and language acquired significance. The technique of close reading was advocated and used in order to understand the importance of so many linguistic details such as sounds, lexis, syntax, rhythm etc. This kind of focus on a text helps to bring out some features that may otherwise have been missed. It provides a kind of framework for students which can be applied in order to teach them to become aware of how the literary text codifies its meanings and challenges the readers to react to the theme and representation of human experience in the text independently.

Isenberg (1990), conducted a survey on the problems which face EFL students of English literature when confronted directly with the reading of a literary text and which stem from a basic 'literary inadequacy'. She maintains that this, when combined with the difficulties posed by a very partial knowledge of the foreign language (with all its linguistic and cultural implications), can make the problem of 'understanding' a literary text seem an ever impossible task to the student. She mentions that many secondary and university-level EFL teachers feel the need to help students develop study strategies to improve LC. She focused on some study strategies which aim at developing the reader's awareness of how he should approach the reading of a literary text and that can be seen as a useful integration into the syllabus even by teachers in countries where tradition

advocates a historical approach to the study of literature. She believes that increasingly, it is the case that teachers in these countries, whether they be native or imported, would like to put more emphasis on the reading of the literary text to help students use more intelligently the historical-critical materials on which they tend to rely too heavily. The question of LC is considered in terms of intellectual performance. According to her, remembering those EFL teachers who work with young adult students, recommendations are offered for improving EFL LC through intervention at the procedural level. The suggestions are based mainly and firstly on the idea that the act of reading a literary text can be seen as a form of information processing, and secondly on a consideration of the thought processes involved in the understanding of a literary text.

Coenen (1992) was one of the first researchers who endeavored to systematically define and characterize LC and thus the term LC finds its origin orderly in literary studies since then. Before that, Culler (1975) and Subsequently Schmidt (1982) used the term by analogy with Chomsky's linguistic competence, in order to describe the literary system. Culler (1975) aimed at the specific system of literary conventions and asked for a kind of comprehensive literary theory that has the potentiality to be considered as a sort of grammar of literature.

Paul (1992) argues that a sort of typical school instruction and program does not strongly encourage and persuade the development of higher-order thinking skills and ability such as critical reading, critical thinking and LC. Paul further explains that knowledge is coterminous with the form of thinking, especially good or critical thinking. However, typical form of school program and instruction with its pure emphasis and focus on the coverage of content and syllabus, is designed as though recall were equivalent to knowledge. This kind of lower-order learning is actually learning by rote or association, with the finished result that learners come up only with memorizing testing material without recognizing and understanding the logic of it. Students tend not to simply recognize that their assertions, beliefs, and statements have implications, and therefore, require evidence to support them. (Paul, 1992).

Actually, many researchers and experts working in the realm of critical LC object the imperfect and poor state of LC in most of the educated adults and also children. For instance, Halpern (1998) refers to research from the field of psychology, concluding that many adults fail to practice and promote LC while reading a literary text in most situations due to lack of the knowledge of literary terminology or not being aware of some strategies which play a very important and vital role in evaluating, analyzing and interpreting a piece of literary work which therefore results in the readers with the very low LC.

Witte, Janssen and Rijlaarsdam (2006) conducted a study which mainly focuses on clarifying the concept of LC, based on the pedagogical content knowledge and the praxis of six expert teachers and their students for three years. They distinguished and identified six levels of LC, actually defined by what students can do with literary texts of a certain complexity. They maintained that two components interact while describing different levels of competence that are: 1) complexity of the literary text and 2) level of understanding and interpretation. After establishing the six levels they tested the system by describing the longitudinal development in LC of 30 students aged 16 to 18 from six different schools over their final years of secondary schooling. In order to assess the literary development of these thirty students, they analyzed the student portfolios which consisted of some book reports and several reading tasks for 8 to 12 books. Each student was involved in three to four interviews: at the beginning of the process (grade 10), and at the end of grades 10, 11 and 12. Then, the portfolios were analyzed for factors such as motivation and indicators of LC. The result of the Analyses of student portfolios shows a development from the start of upper secondary (grade 10) to the end (grade 11 or 12).

In this section they reported the outcomes of the analyses of students' portfolios and subsequent interviews on three elements of LC such as: reading preferences, the type of arguments students used to evaluate the quality of works they read, and also the motives to read literature students communicate in their book reports and interpretation tasks.

Dey (2009) did a research on the English literature study in India about how much the learners can achieve LC in a text based learning environment. She tried to prove that the study of English Literature in India is largely teacher dependent; hence, students rarely acquire LC. At the outset of the study she defined LC in terms of specific Cognitive and Linguistic and Rhetorical Skills, and an adaptation of the Stylistics Approach to Literature was used as the teaching methodology for the experiment. She used an Experimental Group who was taught English poetry specified in their curriculum over a two-year period with gradually decreasing teacher support. A Control Group of comparable ability was also taught the poems in the syllabus using the conventional method. The two groups were tested at the start and end of the experiment and the scripts were statistically analyzed by the researcher and an experienced teacher. The Experimental Group showed significant progress on Overall scores. The researcher then analyzed the progress made by the two groups in terms of the skills that constituted LC using a specially designed Rating Scale and recorded the gains made by the Experimental Group. Next, the two groups were compared on the sub-skills and it was found that special training improved some of the sub-skills significantly. Incidentally, a comparison of the Standard Deviation across groups, showed that the Control Group became more homogenous, a consequence perhaps of traditional teaching which ignores individual differences. It was concluded that a text based approach to literature teaching helped develop LC significantly in students.

## 5.2. EFL Context.

Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini (2005) conducted a survey about dialogue journal writing as a critical EFL literacy practice. They actually employed a kind of ethnographic research method, explored how dialogue journal writing, that enables teachers and learners to be engaged in a written conversation, might provide them an opportunity in order to bring critical pedagogy and foreign language education together in a productive way in the context of a critical literacy practice. The data consisted of some informal written interviews and more than 600 journal entries which were written by 30 16-year-old high school students in Tehran. Consequently, the results were qualitatively analyzed in search of some themes relevant to empowerment as a critical educational value and critical writing as a critical literacy practice. The study revealed that writing dialogue journals as a language education activity in EFL pedagogy may empower learners and provide them with opportunities to express their voice. It further revealed that dialogue journal writing led to gains in critical self-reflective EFL writing ability.

Furthermore, a research has been done by Izadinia and Abednia (2010), about dynamics of an EFL reading course with a critical literacy orientation in which they explored how a critical literacy approach to reading development might contribute to EFL learners' personal development. Also they investigated what students' perceptions of a reading course with a critical literacy orientation are. Some freshman English literature students took part in a reading comprehension course and throughout the course, learners were encouraged to cope with some passages brought by them in a problem solving manner actually through group discussion and also reflective journals. Then they were engaged in a process of writing two self-assessments and also two class assessments at the end of the first month and by the end of the course. Finally, as a result of the thematic analysis of journals, a number of themes emerged which showed the contribution of the CL approach to learners' development of voice and self-awareness.

As the development of language competence is the main focus of teaching a language, LC also plays the major role of development in teaching literature. So as the instruction and application of teaching techniques and strategies can keep help developing language competence among learners, they can also be of help to make a good progress in development of LC, among which are CRS.

## 6. Conclusion.

In this article, some of the works being done in the realm of literature, LC and language teaching, with emphasis on reading skill and critical approaches were mentioned. First of all, the significance of literature and its specific role in language teaching was referred to. Then it discussed the role of reading skill as a basic ability which was required in order to interact with a text. Next, the reasons behind Integrating Literature in Reading Process through some recent ideas were mentioned. After that, the concept of critical approaches toward thinking and reading were reviewed upon proceeding by finding out about the concept of LC and also to have a look at some research conducted with the subject of LC.

Despite changing attitudes towards literature as one of the main materials in EFL classes, nowadays its role in EFL education is undeniable. Literature is an efficient tool for practicing all language skills and specially reading skill. Literature provides the learner, with a numerous authentic and attractive texts, which let them to think critically and get involved in social relations that cross nation borders, on the condition that it is properly selected and be accompanied with other tools and it depends mainly on instructor's proficiency and experiment to collect suitable texts for learners. Despite some negative ideas about using literature in EFL classes, none of them shows serious obstacles toward applying suitable literary texts in EFL curriculum. So, there are surely some kinds of literary texts which each learner would be interested in reading it.

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