USE OF LITERATURE IN READING COMPREHENSION CLASSES BY ELT TEACHERS

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Abstract

This study has been conducted to reveal the reasons why ELT teachers use/do not use literature for reading comprehension activities. The study has been conducted with 140 preparatory class instructors working at foundation and state universities in Turkey. The data have been collected through a questionnaire, specifically designed for the study. The data were evaluated on Microsoft Excel 2010. The findings reveal that in general ELT teachers use literature in their reading classes; however, they consider restrictions of the curriculum, insufficient class time, and crowded classes as hindrances. Their perception of literary works to be linguistically difficult, demotivating, and their reliance on teachers to paraphrase, clarify, interpret, and explain appears as other significant reasons for using little or no literature for reading comprehension activities.

Keywords: literature use, ELT, literature and ELT, reading comprehension, teachers’ perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Use of literary works in the teaching of English has been a matter of concern for many years as part of search for better, more efficient and more constructive reading comprehension activities. Reading comprehension is one of the main important elements in English language learning for all students because it provides the basis for a substantial amount of learning in education (Alvermann and Earle, 2003, pp.12-30). Though reading is not the only skill to be taught in the language classroom, it is definitely one of the most important for many EFL learners (Rivers, 1981; Carell, Devine, and Eskey, 1998). Reading comprehension is important “in all levels of education as it enables learners who are struggling with their academic and literary tasks to overcome their challenges” (Ness, 2009, p.143). As critics agree, reading comprehension occurs during “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with the written language” (Snow, 2002, p.11) through which readers are able to understand the message of the text.

All types of written materials on paper and on electronic sources such as newspapers, letters, weather reports, magazines, comics, flyers, advertisements, official documents, mails, SMS messages may be all used in reading comprehension lessons but apart from those, literature is a valuable instrument in facilitating reading comprehension. Using literary material that is relevant and appealing to learners in order to gain from the advantages of literary texts in teaching reading comprehension is also a valuable asset. In addition to all types of written material, literary works are precious materials to be exploited for reading comprehension activities because literary texts provide students with the opportunity to expand on the limits of the text by integrating readers’ experiences and beliefs into meanings of the text. This integration
facilitates students’ ability to create new interpretations and inferences from the text. According to Keene and Zimmermann (1997), reading stretches the limits of the literal text by folding reader’s experience and belief into the literal meanings in the text as reading creates a new interpretation and an inference (p.147). Literary works are usually very convenient tools as they integrate implicit information. Hismanoglu (2005) expresses his own view as follows:

Literature can be useful in the language learning process owing to the personal involvement it fosters in the reader. Once the student reads a literary text, he begins to inhabit the text. He is drawn into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. At this juncture, the prominence of the selection of a literary text in relation to the needs, expectations, and interests, language level of the students is evident. In this process, he can remove the identity crisis and develop into an extrovert. (p.55)

Through extensive or intensive reading of works of literature, students are exposed to lexical items that are embedded within natural linguistic applications (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). This exposure further enables language learners to gradually acquire meanings as native speakers do. Since they are contextualized, these texts provide learners with a wide variety of registers, text types and styles that are at different difficulty levels. Here, literature gains importance since it may be used as one of the basic components of reading comprehension. Through reading various forms of literature, students are able to develop a narrative schema, which is an embedded knowledge of the narratives structure or narrative grammar that can be as well applied in the comprehension of other narratives (Carrell, 1984, pp.103-111). Moreover, many features of the language such as “the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas” are presented at different levels of difficulty through literary works used in reading comprehension activities (Collie and Slater, 1987,p.5).

In addition to providing important authentic foundations and contributing to students’ cultural enrichment (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, pp.5-15), Lazar (1993) suggests that literature motivates students, offers access to cultural background, encourages language acquisition, expands language awareness, develops students’ interpretative abilities and educates the whole person in so far as it enhances their imaginative and affective capacities (pp.9-15).

Despite obvious benefits of using literature in language teaching, its application is limited in many ELT classrooms. Hismanoglu (2005) attributes this to a variety of factors:

Literature plays an important role in the English programs of many non-English speaking countries. However, there are some problems encountered by language teachers within the area of teaching English through literature. First, there are very few pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in a language classroom. Second, there is a lack of preparation in the area of literature teaching in TEFL programs. Third, there is the absence of clear-cut objectives defining the role of literature in EFL. Many instructors try to include literature in their classroom, but lack the background and training in that field. (p.65)

Supporting the factors mentioned above, Savvidou (2005) states that there is often reluctance by teachers, course designers and examiners to introduce unabridged and
authentic texts to the EFL syllabus (p.4). Robson (1989) argues that due to its syntactic and lexical difficulty, literature is seen to be able to do “little or nothing to help students to become competent users of the target language” (p.25). Sometimes, literature texts are considered as minimally relevant to the needs of students (McKay and Moulding, 1986, pp.89-109) and therefore studying literary texts has minimal bearing on the EFL students’ needs to support a functional command of the language. On the other hand, Lin and Guey (2004) draw attention to the teachers’ concern with practical skills and claim that “literature has not been given due consideration at many colleges and universities because many educational institutions have put their main emphasis on practical language skills at the expense of literature” (p.2). Another concern stated by Collie and Slater (1987) is that literature has continued to gradually disappear from ELT classrooms (p.10). Schultz (2002) voices a similar view concern as he claims “literature and authentic literary texts disappear from language classrooms” (p.35). Many colleges are increasingly focusing on training teachers in the instrumental functions of language, with decreasing focus on training in the overall aesthetic understanding and appreciation of language. This suggests that the curriculum of ELT Departments mostly focuses on pedagogy where the students are instructed in the correct language forms.

As far as teaching English as a foreign language is concerned, the ability to read between the lines is a challenging task for teachers as it is for the students. Language teachers need to help students to be equipped with the cultural context that facilitates the ability to decipher literary texts. Such a rich cultural context, which is provided by extensive reading of literary texts not only enhances students’ ability to comprehend texts, but also makes it possible for language teachers in ELT to provide guidance to students due to their deep awareness of the cultural context of the language (Elioglu, 1992). Since culture is inseparable from language, it is inseparable from the teaching process as well. Understanding the cultural context of daily conversational conventions such as greetings, forms of address, thanking and making requests is beyond producing grammatically correct sentences. In the countries where English is a foreign language, the best way to overcome limited exposure to the target language will be possible through knowing more about the culture, which is naturally interwoven with language. In this sense, culture refers to basic social skills that facilitate successful communication with other members of the community with regards to audience, setting, genre and purpose. Culture also refers to the aesthetic nature of literature, fine arts, music and films, as well as attributing to the way of life of the target community such as institutional structures and interpersonal relationships at work, home or during leisure (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). In a similar manner to the relation between culture and language, literature, with its universal appeal and artistic literary qualities, reflects the culture of the society it belongs to. Readers are also able to understand how the characters behave and speak in different settings, thereby enriching the cultural dimension of their language learning.

While reading literary texts, students have a variety of literary experiences, that is, metacognitive awareness, activation and application of previous knowledge, drawing inferences, making predictions, summarizing, analyzing and synthesizing information, developing and answering their own questions. That’s why literature is significant in reading comprehension and therefore in ELT.

**METHODOLOGY**

**The Research Questions**

The aim of this study is to put forward the perceptions and practices of English language
teachers as to literature use in their reading comprehension classes. The reasons why they use or do not use literature or literary works are within the scope of the study. Thus, the study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. Why do teachers use literature or literary works in their reading classes?

2. Why do teachers use few or no literary works in their reading classes?

Population and Sampling

The population in this study involves 140 non-native English language instructors from 4 state and 4 foundation universities. The instructors chosen as the population of the study are from Medeniyet University, Yeditepe University, Uskudar University and Suleyman Sah University in Istanbul, Orhan Gazi University in Bursa, Adnan Menderes University in Aydın, Yalova University in Yalova and Balıkesir University in Balıkesir.

Convenience sampling method has been chosen in this study to supply the appropriate sample and on the assumption that “convenience sampling method includes participants who are readily available and agree to participate in a study” (Frey, Carl and Gary, 2000, p.131).

Data Collection Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire has been designed from scratch to gather data about the perceptions and practices of teachers of English towards literature use in their reading classes at preparatory schools of universities. In the questionnaire prepared by the researcher, a 5-Lickert scale is used.

The Questionnaire

Many researchers prefer to use a Likert-type scale because it’s very easy to analyze statistically (Jackson, 2009). Therefore in this part, 5-Likert scale (from 1= totally agree to 5= totally disagree) has been applied. The instructors have been asked about their literature practices in their reading classes, and the reasons about why they use or do not use literature. The Questionnaire consists of 38 questions.

The first 16 questions are related to the first research question “Why do teachers use literature or literary works in their reading classes?” The remaining 22 questions are about the second research question “Why do teachers use few or no literary works in their reading classes?”

The answers to the item 20 indicate that only a small percentage of teachers (17.85 %) are satisfied with the reading comprehension activities in the course books therefore, as the answers to the item 17 verify most teachers (56.72 %) use reading comprehension activities other than the ones in the course books.

The items 1, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 are about the reasons why teachers use literature/literary works in their reading classes. 76 % believe that use of literature/literary works in their reading classes is motivating; 70 % are of the opinion that literature/literary works in their reading classes is a valuable complement to the classroom material, 75% assume that it offers a good deal of cultural information, 72.85 % think it expands students’ language awareness, 65% believe it develops students’ interpretative abilities, 63.27% think it sparks curiosity, 59.28 % assume students become more productive and creative through literature, 65 % hold the view that it stimulates students’ language acquisition, 62.14 % are of the opinion that literature helps students more actively involved intellectually in learning English and 60.72 % hold the view that literature helps students more actively involved emotionally in learning English. However, only 37.14 % of the teachers believe that literature provides excellent stimulus for group work whereas 36.43 % are not sure about whether literature provides excellent stimulus for group work.
The items 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are about teachers’ perceptions about the benefits of literature on the skills. 65 % say literature improves reading skills, 62.14 % believe that it improves writing skills and 79 % are of the opinion that it improves vocabulary. For these reasons they say they use literature / literary works for the reading comprehension activities. However, only 27.14 % say that it improves listening skills and 37.85 % say that it improves speaking skills whereas 29.29 % are not sure whether literature improves listening skills and 28.57 % are not sure whether literature improves speaking skills.

The items 18, 19, and 38 are about the constraints resulting from crowded classes, insufficient class time and curriculum. 48.57 % believe that large number of students, 62.14 % believe that insufficient class time and 62.86 % believe that restrictions of the curriculum are hindrances against using literature. The replies to the items 21 and 22 reveal that 64.29 % of the respondents feel confident and 63.57 % feel competent on how to teach with literature; the numbers of hesitant teachers over the questions are relatively high, 22.14 % and 25.71 % respectively. The answers teachers gave to the items 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 confirm their answers because 73.57 % declare they can have an access to literary works, 66.43 % state they can find appropriate literary works, 60.72 % declare they can find appropriate literary works to students’ interests, 57.14 % say that they can find appropriate literary works to students’ language proficiency and 49.28 % claim that they do not have any difficulty finding literary works relevant to life experiences of students. Even so, 25.71 % think that they do not feel competent about how to teach with literary works, and 25 % state that they are not sure about how to find relevant work to life experiences of students.

The answers to the items 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, and 37 indicate the reasons why teachers use few or no literature. 47.86 % are of the opinion that literary materials can be very difficult linguistically, and therefore demotivating for average student, 43.57 % think that use of literature may rely too heavily on the teacher to paraphrase, clarify and explain, 41.43 % say that students are dependent on ready-made interpretations from the teacher. However, the role of teachers is a cause for hesitancy as their answers to the items 31 and 32 show. 18.57 % say they are not sure whether use of literature will result in little student participation while 24.28 % voice their concern with students’ dependency on teachers’ interpretations. For the item 33, 27.14 % answer that they are not sure whether language used in literary works sometimes deviates from the Standard English. Teachers’ answers to the items 34 and 36 indicate that almost half of the respondents either believe or are not sure whether literary texts are full of old and outdated vocabulary and therefore different from the contemporary English. Their answers for the item 29 show that 62.15 % do not think that literary works are only appropriate for ‘literary-minded’ students. However, 38.57 % of the respondents say that literary works require background knowledge from students whereas 20 % are not sure about it. Only 20 % relate their use of few or no literary works to their inability to check what students are doing as the reasons whereas 29.28 % are not sure whether they can check what students are doing for developing reading comprehension outside class.

CONCLUSION

With regard to literature use of ELT teachers, this study has reached some significant conclusions. To start with, ELT Teachers are not contented with the reading activities in the course books, that is, they do not think reading comprehension activities are sufficient for improving reading comprehension skills. In addition to the reading comprehension activities in the course books, they tend to use
literature as a complementary material in their reading classes.

ELT teachers consider literature as motivating, a valuable complement to the classroom material, and a good conveyor of cultural information. They believe that literature raises students’ language awareness, develops students’ interpretative abilities, sparks curiosity, helps students become more productive and creative, stimulates students’ language acquisition, and helps students to be more actively involved intellectually and emotionally in learning English. However, a considerable percentage of ELT teachers do not think that literature provides excellent stimulus for group work and the percentage of teachers who declare that they are not sure whether literature provides stimulus for group work is the highest of all ‘Not Sure’ answers.

As regards the benefits of literature on the skills, ELT teachers believe that literature improves reading and writing skills as well as vocabulary. But they do not think that it improves listening and speaking skills. The relatively higher number of hesitant teachers over whether use of literature improves listening and speaking skills shows that teachers may use literature more in their reading classes if they are persuaded about the positive effect of literature use on listening and speaking skills.

As to the reasons why they do not use literature or literary works, ELT teachers do not consider the language of literary texts among the reasons for not using them for reading comprehension activities because ELT teachers do not hold the opinion that language used in literary works deviate from the conventions of Standard English, or contemporary English, or that literary texts are full of old and outdated vocabulary. Although most of the respondents do not assume that literary works are only appropriate for ‘literary-minded’ students, a significant percentage of them believe literary works require background knowledge for each student or voice their hesitancy over the question. Teachers do not regard checking what students are doing outside class as a reason of not using literature. ELT teachers claim that they can have access to literary works and decide which literary works are appropriate for students. They have no difficulty in finding appropriate literary works to students’ interests, language proficiency or life experiences.

Nevertheless, ELT teachers regard insufficient class time, large number of students and curriculum restriction as the biggest obstacles against using literature. The perception of literary works to be linguistically difficult and therefore demotivating for the average student appears as another reason why teachers are disinclined to use literature. A considerable number of teachers are unwilling to use literature in the reading comprehension activities as they consider it relies heavily on teachers to paraphrase, clarify, and explain literary works and students are dependent on their ready-made interpretations. Accordingly, almost a quarter of the respondents declare that they are not sure about how to find relevant literary works to life experiences of students. Again the relatively higher percentage of hesitant teachers over their confidence and competence brings into mind the idea that if they are trained properly they are inclined to use literature more.

REFERENCES


