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IMPROVING THE STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY THROUGH LITERATURE: LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract

This article presents a library study of an approach of teaching literature that emphasizes on improving the students' English language proficiency through literature and a practice of the approach in the classroom by using a literary work written by Anton Chekhov entitled 'A Marriage Proposal'. The study aims at discussing a theory of an approach for teaching literature which attempts to improve the students' linguistic competence through literary works. The approach is chosen in accordance to Van (2009)'s review of the approaches to literary analysis, in this case by emphasizing on the approach for improving the students' language skill through literature which is called Language-based Approach. This study also apply Lazar's (1993) procedures of language-based approach which cover the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities.

Keywords: Language-Based technique, literary works.

INTRODUCTION

One of the purposes of teaching Literature to the English as Foreign Language learners, as suggested by Collie and Slatter (1990) and Lazar (1993), is to improve the students' English proficiency in language aspect. Stern (1991) echoed the suggestion in a similar view. An approach that integrates literature study with the mastery of the language and the further development of language skills is one of his emphases on the importance of teaching literature to the English as Foreign Language learners. Thus, considering the benefits on language aspect that literature provides, the writer thinks that the teaching of Literature to the EFL learners in the attempt to improve the students' English proficiency through literature is worth discussed.

Noticing the importance of the study of literature for EFL learners, Van (2009) mentioned how literature and literary analysis are beneficial for EFL teachers. Some of the benefits gained from literature are the exposition of the students to meaningful context, introducing the students to a profound range of vocabularies, dialogues, and prose, the development of the students' English language skill, the development of cultural awareness, the encouragement of critical thinking, and most importantly, the conformation to the student-centered and interactive tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). In discussing the relevance of literary analysis to literature in the language classroom, Van (2009) overviewed six approaches to literary analysis, namely New Criticism, Structuralism, Stylistics, Reader-response, Language-based, and Critical Literacy.

Language-based approach to teaching literature

Related to the purpose of using literature in EFL classrooms in the attempt to improve the students' English proficiency, Van (2009) has also analyzed an approach that emphasizes on developing the students' language skill, which is called Language-based approach. This approach emphasizes the awareness of the language of literature which is a basic stage for EFL learners. Van believed that the approach is more accessible for language learners since it facilitates the students' responses and experience with literature. Language-based approach provides a variety of language instruction activities. Literature is seen as an excellent vehicle resulting in the four-skill of English language development through interaction, collaboration, peer teaching, and student interdependence. The role of the teacher, therefore, is to introduce

and clarify technical terms, to prepare and offer appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene when necessary to provide prompts or stimuli (Van, 2009).

Language-based approach to teaching literature offers the opportunity for the students to improve their English proficiency through literary works. By using the approach, a literature teacher can create a student-centered atmosphere in the classroom by, to be simply said, merely give instructions for the students to conduct in the classroom.

Lazar (1993) believed that the main purpose of the use of literature in the classroom is to improve the students' knowledge of, and proficiency in, English. Similar to Collie and Slatter (1990) and Stern (1991), Lazar asserted that literary texts are resources that provide stimulating language activities. He also suggested that the language-based approach includes techniques and procedures concerned more directly with the study of the literary texts itself.

Lazar (1993) developed some steps as the procedures for language-based approach to teaching literature in EFL classrooms. The procedures are divided into three steps of activities: Pre-reading activities, While-reading activities, and Post-reading activities. The pre-reading activities include (a) helping students with cultural background, (b) stimulating students' interest in the story, and (c) pre-teaching vocabulary. The While-reading activities include (a) helping students understand the plot, (b) helping students understand the characters, (c) helping students with difficult vocabulary, and (d) helping students with style and language. The last but not the least, post-reading activities include (a) helping students make interpretations of the text, (b) understanding narrative point of view, (c) follow up writing activities, and (d) follow up fluency practice.

A Marriage Proposal: a practice of Language-based approach

In order to make it clearer, the writer would like to give examples of some instructions for the students' activities by using Language-based approach by discussing a literary work written by Anton Chekhov entitled 'A Marriage Proposal'. The work belongs to the literary genre called comedy drama. The work, as the purposes of literature suggest, provides all it takes that can expose the students to complex themes and unexpected uses of language, provide cultural enrichment for the students, provide a particularly appropriate way of stimulating the language acquisition, expand the students' language awareness, and help stimulate the students' imagination.

Let us explore Chekhov's work by applying Lazar (1993)'s procedures for language-based approach to teaching literature in EFL classrooms. As aforementioned, Lazar suggested three steps of activities covering the pre-reading activities, while-reading activities, and the post-reading activities. Stimulating the students' interest in the story is an important thing to do at the beginning of the exploration of a literary work. This activity is considered essential as the initial step of learning language to literature. This belongs to the pre-reading activities. In order to stimulate the students' interest, the teacher may give a brief summary of the story, give hints of some characters involved in the story, and so on. The teacher can also provide the cultural background of the story, by giving a slight description of the work's author before the students start reading the literary work. After the students' get their interest, they may start reading the story. The teacher can assign the students to find some new vocabularies while they are reading.

The while reading activities include helping students understand the plot, helping students understand the characters, helping students with difficult vocabulary, and helping students with style and language. As a strategy for reading in this second step, the teacher can instruct the students to find the author's purposes of writing his work. For example, the teacher can aid the students finding the purpose by asking 'why Chekhov portrays Lomov as a ridiculous, shallow man?'. The teacher can also ask the students to explain how Lomov's behavior is consistent with his personality (Glencoe, 2010). In order to help the students with the style and language, the teacher can instruct them to analyze Chekhov's use of particular stylistic devices to convey mood and character traits by asking questions like 'What end punctuation often appears in the dialogue on this page?', or 'What effect does the heavy use of exclamation marks have on the mood of the play?'. As the student read the work, the teacher can encourage them to pay attention to the repeated styles of speech that identify the characters and convey mood.

CONCLUSIONS

After the students have managed the pre-reading and while reading activities, the teacher needs to lead them to post-reading activities, which include helping students make interpretations of the text, understanding narrative point of view, follow up writing activities, and follow up fluency practice. In making interpretation of the text, the teacher can administer

the students to answer some questions concerning the text being discussed. While doing so, the teacher encourages them to respond and think critically towards the literary work. Some questions may help them mind map the story. Moreover, the teacher can ask the students to evaluate and analyze the text and also to connect the story to the students' real life. Writing and fluency practice activities can be conducted as the last procedures in Language-based approach according to Lazar (1993). In writing activity, the teacher can ask the students to write, for example, a narrative of at least 750 words that includes a twist ending. A twist ending, also known as a surprise ending, is a type of situational irony. Students' narratives should take the form of a story and include exposition, character development, and rising action conclude with a surprise ending maintain a tone that preserves the element of surprise (Glencoe, 2010).

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