

FICTITIOUS CHARACTERS IN THE CLASSROOM- USING LITERARY CHARACTERS IN TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Dr. Ibrahim Alfaki

King Abdul-Aziz University, ELI , Jeddah, KSA.

Nile Valley University, North Sudan.

Postal Address: Ibrahim Alfaki, **Room** 244, Building 30, ELI , King Abdul-Aziz University, JEDDAH 21589 , P.O. Box 80200, **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.**

ABSTRACT: *The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which literary characters can be used in teaching English to speakers of other languages. The study is an interpretive qualitative in nature. The findings indicate that there are numerous ways to make use of literary characters in English language lessons. There are a lot of activities that can be used to develop students' writing, others enhance reading skills. However, all these activities can be utilized to practice and develop listening and speaking as well. So they have to be as interactive as possible. For this reason class work is supposed to be conducted in pairs or groups. Some activities are in a form of interviews, others produce posters or letters. The ones compiled in this article are but prototypes subject to adjustment, modification, simplification or a combination of several ideas, so as to suit different teaching and learning situations. The main recommendation, however, is not to let characters go without being exploited to the maximum for the benefit of the language learner.*

KEYWORDS: Classroom Activities, Literature, Literary Characters , Teaching English,

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a source of inspiration. It is one of the effective ways writers use to express their views and depict the world they live in. Reading literary works from other cultures, helps one get acquainted with the way people behave, think and talk. This comes in handy for learners of foreign languages, for they need good exposition to authentic language so they can be fluent, native-like speakers of the language. Fictional characters are one of the means literature employs to reflect cultural and intellectual elements. Drawn from the real world, characters look, act and speak in a pattern similar to that of the native speakers' of the language. Each character dresses differently, uses their own language and have their own unique personality, motivation and attitude. All of these elements and more contribute greatly to language learners. Somehow, literary characters are but native speakers caught on paper for the learner to learn from and spend time with, a luxury that is not always easy to have in countries where English is a foreign language.

Not all teachers and learners of English approach literature and literary characters with this view. Literature could be a heavy burden studied to pass a certain test. Characters, as a part of literature, could be regarded as nothing but flimsy incarnation utilized merely to entertain the reader then

forgotten later on. Teachers, by so doing, miss a great opportunity to teach English through an interesting, culturally rich means.

Statement of the problem

In some societies, learners of English have little, if any, literary competence which results in their coping with fiction as simple works intended for pleasure and time passing. In these societies many aspects of literature are not taken seriously. Likewise, the problem with teaching characters is that learners tend to be indifferent to them as they only exist in imagination. Therefore, the part where characters are presented is deemed tedious and pointless. Teachers pay little Attention as to how characters should be introduced and analyzed. This underestimated aspect of literary texts is dealt with as a heavy task by both learners and teachers whereas it can be used as for the benefit of both parties.

Objectives

The study aims at describing ways of utilizing literary characters in TESOL classes. It attempts to discuss some techniques which can be used to improve learners' language through fictitious characters.

Questions

1. What techniques can be used to render characterization more productive in English language classes?
2. What aspects should be addressed while teaching English through fictitious characters?
3. How important is it to focus on characters while teaching a literary piece?

Hypotheses

1. There are various ways of utilizing fictitious characters to enhance English language teaching and learning.
2. Several aspects can be addressed while using characters in English language teaching.
3. Characterization, if properly exploited, can be a helpful tool in TESOL classes .

Significance of the Study

This study is hoped to be useful.

1. Curriculum designers: This paper attempts to verify the usefulness of utilizing characters in ESL Classes. Curriculum developers finding this convincing shall take characterization into consideration when incorporating literary content in their syllabus. At the same time, they may find the activities included so edifying that they may adapt them to be used as suggested activities for their material.
2. TESOL Teachers: The study endeavors to supply teachers with the crucial background knowledge about literary characters in terms of their significance, analysis and types. It also calls their attention to the benefits of presenting characters in TESOL context. TESOL instructors will hopefully find this useful as it suggests several interactive activities to utilize in the classroom.
3. TESOL students: Students will learn why they study literature as a part of their curriculum, and why they should look deeper into characterization. By informing learners about the significance

of characterization, this study helps encourage them to undertake this literary element with more enthusiasm. This suggests ways and activities which help learners understand characters and have fun while improving various linguistic skills.

Limits

This study is conducted in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia during the academic year 2014. The study targets TESOL classes where literature is used as a secondary source for learning English.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a descriptive analytic method. This research method “helps to explain educational phenomena in terms of the conditions or relationships that exist, opinions that are held...process that are going on...or effects that are developing” (Koul, 1993, p.403). The article attempts to analyze, discuss and explain techniques that exploit literary characters in TESOL classes. Koul states that “the descriptive investigations are of immense value in solving problems about children, school organization, supervision and administration, curriculum, teaching methods and evaluation. (Koul, 1993, p.403). The data to be collected are of qualitative, as this type of data “provides insights into the problem and helps to develop ideas. Qualitative research is also used to uncover trends in thought and opinions, and dive deeper into the problem” (Wyse, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature and Literary Language

Literature and language are closely related. Literature, is referred to as a sophisticated form of language, or “...language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” (Pound, 1960, p28). However, an attempt to provide a perfect definition of literature shall only be rewarded with discrepancies. As Lazar (1993) remarks “We have seen that defining literature is no easy task...there is considerable controversy among literary theorists as to how this can be done” (p. 5). Since the term literature can cover anything from an epic poem to a piece of text in an advertisement brochure, it is hard to set boundaries as to what is and what is not literature.

Whenever the term literature comes to mind, one immediately recall texts rife with powerful imagery, creative structures and high sounding vocabulary. Consider the following quotation from a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

His heart danced upon her movements like a cork upon a tide. He heard what her eyes said to him from beneath their cowl and knew that in some dim past, whether in life or reverie, he had their tale before...Yet a voice within him spoke above the noise of his dancing heart, asking him would he take her gift to which he had only to stretch out his hand. (Joyce, 1996, p.64). Because literature reflects true colors of life, works may be written in a language deemed simple and very commonplace. This is prevalent in children or young adult fiction. Some even contain profanities or rare colloquial expressions:

All of a sudden-for no good reason, really, except that I was sort of in the mood for horsing around-I felt like jumping off the washbowl and getting old Stradlater in a half nelson. That's a

wrestling hold, in case you don't know, where you get the other guy around the neck and chock him to death, if you feel like it. (Salinger, 1951, 30)

The linguistic variety comes in handy for TESOL teachers since variety is recommended in educational settings. Nonetheless, material should carefully be selected after being scrutinized for cultural and linguistic appropriateness. In this study the term “literature” will be limited to major literary forms such as poetry, fiction and plays.

Literature and Language learning

Many TESOL curriculums incorporate literary texts within their modules. Those could be, short stories, poems, extracts from novels or plays. Some reading textbooks could go as far as including adapted versions of short novels. Many teachers also prefer to utilize literary texts of their own selection to be studied as an extra-curricular material or even to be taken as a course project. Above all, English language majors –Education, arts and translation- provide students with literary canons among the subjects. A question arises: why does there have to be a dose of literature wherever there is language teaching? There is no question that literary characters are constituents of literary pieces, and unless the feasibility of exploiting literature as a whole is proved, then there is no point for characters to be understood.

Why Teach Literature?

Some learners are not aware of why they have to study literature if they are studying general English or translation. Colin C. Irvine(2008, p.1) says , “while he was teaching literature at school ... there were—even when the unit seemed to be going well—those smart and exasperating students who insisted on asking the question, “Why do we have to read this?”. Some of the reasons are:

- a. Access to foreign culture.
- b. Motivation enhancement.
- c. Practice various language skills.
- d. Authentic language.

DISCUSSION

Significance of Characterization

Characterization is a significant factor in any fictional work. Characters carry out plot, voice out authors' ideas through dialogue, symbolize concepts, and represent cultures. Sometimes, characters can be too influential that they overshadow plot and other elements. For example, some works are so centered on the character that little is happening besides analyzing the character. *The Sun Also Rises* “captured for the generation that would come to be called “Lost” the spirit of its age” (Hemingway, 2011). The novel describes the generation of youth that witnessed World War I. The characteristics of that generation are represented by the group of people in the novel. Few events take place other than little fights, parties and a bull fighting match. “*Hamlet*” could also be an example of works centered mostly on their protagonists. Compared to *King Lear*, a play full of

battles, conspiracies and treasons, *Hamlet* boils down to soliloquies and dialogues revealing the hero's personality.

Characters assist the reader in several ways. Characters relate to the readers themselves since they may bear some of the reader's traits or his mindset at certain angles or situations. In some cases the character reminds the readers of people they knew in reality. Assuming that characters are withdrawn from real life, they are so real they are larger than life. People may refer to their actions, echo their sayings and even take them as their own idols. . The young assassin who took the life of John Lennon was widely believed to have been influenced by Holden Caulfield views. Chapman had a copy of the novel as he shot the victim. As analyzed by Stashower, "*some aspects of The Catcher in the Rye, set beside Mark Chapman's murder of John Lennon, seems so suggestive that not to speculate upon the connections between the two seems a temptation impossible to forgo*" (Stashower, 1983).

Literary characters can make a nation-wide sensation. "*After the publication of Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther in Germany in 1774, for example, there was a fashion among young men in Europe for suicide, and act modeled on the suicide of the eponymous hero of that novel.*" (Bennet & Royle, 2004, p.63). Those fictional beings may grow up to be a part of the nation consciousness that they are used in the language to represent personality stereotypes with or without knowing they come from. "*Si El-Sayed, the authoritarian father figure of [Mahfouz's] most ambitious work, The Cairo Trilogy, has become an Arabic byword for monstrous male chauvinism*". (Naguib Mahfouz, 2006).

Some characters evolve as to occupy a spot in psychology. Oedipus complex - derived from the well celebrated Greek tragedy- describes "a sexual desire" (Oedipus Complex, 2014). Freud , the father of psychoanalysis, wrote an article on Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* entitled "Dostoevsky and Parricide". Among several psychological aspects of the novel, the article discussed how one of the characters (Ivan) embodied the feeling of guilt for a sin he hasn't himself committed but only wished for it to take place. Freud points out that Ivan illustrated this theme because "'it is a matter of indifference who actually committed the crime; psychology is only concerned to know who desired it emotionally and who welcomed it when it was done.'" (cited in Cummins, n.d). Thus, observing skillfully crafted literary characters helps readers understand and analyze people they deal with in the world outside the literary works.

Some characters may not incarnate an individual but a national theme. It expresses a frame of mind common among a certain nation, race or generation. A good example of this is *Mustafa Saeed* in Saleh's "*Season of Migration to the North*". The hero in the novel represents , among other things , the clash between eastern and western cultures . *Mustafa* had been an eminent Sudanese figure in the West before he decided to come back to his homeland. He gets married to a local woman only to drown himself in the river later on. There was this huge inner conflict between the style of life he got addicted to in England and the way of life in the Sudanese villages . "On the face of it, the Sudanese are unable to benefit from the values of the West, but they cannot remain bound by

the customs of the village. Either alternative will be the death of them” (Saleh , 2009). This theme is shared by Middle Eastern people, and has been a major issue and a source of great debates.

In a way, Mustafa Saeed, represents many Arab scholars who spent a part of their lives in the west then had a problem fitting themselves back into their societies. In The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway, carefully chosen characters were there to create an image of the Lost Generation, the generation of American youth right after World War I. The way the characters lived, thought and quarreled illustrated what is referred to as the Lost Generation. In a way, characters can record the characteristics, notions and ideas of a certain group of people. They may admonish them, stand up for them or simply depict them.

Characters can be a simple demonstration of qualities such as fear, courage, and loyalty. *Pahom* in Tolstoy's How Much Land Does a Man Need , is an incarnation of greed. From the beginning of the short story to the very end, he is chasing land, moving from place to another just to gain more property. His greed, and that is the moral, leads him to his downfall. Likewise, *Mr. Hyde* in Dr.Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a manifestation of vice. According to Halberstam, Mr. Hyde “*combines perversion with a lust for murder, he allies sex with violence, and he produces within his own person a form and shape for deviant sexuality*” (1991, p.80).

The value of characters is maximized by how realistically they have been presented . However, characters can be as real as the readers themselves . They could be political, religious or historical figures. Such characters can be more appealing to some readers since they are familiar to them through general reading or background knowledge. It is hard to argue whether using real people as characters makes them more believable than made up characters. When celebrities are brought into the world of fiction, they are subject to adaptations and personal interpretation. Richard III (1452 -1485), a king no less real than any other king in history, was depicted as an evil, sadistic villain. Lansdale(2013, p.8), challenges that concept:

[Psychologists] examined one of the most persistent and critical depictions of Richard's personality – the suggestion that he was a murdering psychopath. This reputation – portrayed most famously in Shakespeare's play – does not seem to have any basis in the facts we have about his life. He showed little signs of the traits psychologists would use to identify psychopaths today – including narcissism, deviousness, and lack of empathy in close relationships.

Readers need to rethink the details fiction furnishes on the thoughts and emotions of real characters. Was the character really hesitant or decisive at that moment? Were the ideas revealed in the Dream of the Celt are the ones that actually occurred to Roger Casement just before his execution? “*He was praying and repeating hymns feeling happy that he is walking straight and that he hasn't wept or shed a tear. At moments, he shut his eyes asking God for mercy, but only the pain of Ann Jephson what was before his eyes*” (Liosa, 2012, p.526). Mullan (2006, p.83) suggests that “*as fiction usurps the province of biography, however it risks condemning itself to a kind of triviality.....something perhaps more entertaining than the truth, but something less than the truth too*” .

No doubt, actual people are subjected to literary processing just like imaginary characters are. In some cases, this would render factious characters more credible and amusing than characters ripped straight out of our world. So, characters are inspiring, edifying and interesting elements that should be given due consideration whenever a literary work is being read.

Significance of Characters in TESOL

There are various ways in which characters can be useful to learners of English :

a. Source of Vocabulary

Writers often paint their characters . They bestow distinctive features to each and every one of their characters. Those features will bring along certain vocabulary that learners may otherwise not be able to encounter in their real life where English is only recognized as a second or foreign language. Examples of such features would be: **Physical appearance**: “There was an old man with a black eye patch over one eye, a young lad who looked cross eyed” (Saramago,2006, p.12), **personality**: e.g. “*She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, and I have no opinion of her*” (Austen, 1994, p.7), e.g. “*You are a romantic idiot.*” (Shaw, 1984, p.86), e.g. “His second wife was a very virtuous woman; but had a violent temper” (Maupassant, 2012, p.184), **occupations**: Seger (1990, p.12) says “*Sometimes the context is the character’s occupation. Someone on Wall Street has a different pace and life-style from a farmer in Iowa*” , each character will come along with a few words pertinent to one’s job. For instance, Grisham’s characters are usually lawyers, judges and juries. That entails using a wide range of legal jargon. Terms related to jobs are valuable and might be handy for the learners’ life outside of the classrooms The following quotation from *The Partner* illustrates this concept: “*Close. It was a separate crime rider, in addition to a customary Errors and Omissions policy. It protected the law firm from fraud and theft by its employee and partners.*” (Grisham, 1997, p.219), here is yet another example from *The Old Man and the Sea*, where the main character is a fisher man: “*I would like to fly very slowly at two hundred fathoms high and see the fish from above. In the turtle boats I was in the cross-tree of the mast-head....*” (Hemingway, 2002, p.58). There can be no end to categories of vocabulary that can be extracted from the life of the literary characters: talents, habits, or favorite meals and so on.

b. Style

Characters in a literary work do not all speak in the same way. King Lear does not talk in the same as the Fool does. Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times* speaks as a learned, rational man would speak while Stephen Blackpool in the same novel speaks as a poor man with low education. This applies to diction , expressions, pronunciation and accent. Hardy proposes that “a novelist should be allowed...to convey the spirit of ‘intelligent peasant talk’ by retaining ‘the idiom, compass and mispronunciations’”,(Mullan, 2006, p.129). Getting exposed to such aspects and varieties helps learners assimilate patterns of speech both consciously and subconsciously. Below are a couple of examples of how different characters may sound.

c. Inspiration and Encouragement

TESOL teachers may expect learners to have a special bond with the one or more characters in a certain text. “The reader is eager to find out what happens as events unfold; he or she feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses” (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.7). Those

fantasy people might remind the reader of people they knew or, in many cases, of their own selves. This demonstrates how important it is to select works with characters that are likely to appeal to the learners' age, cultural and social background.

d. Guide for Social Conduct

Learners studying English will benefit from getting acquainted with the way native speakers behave in different situations. For example, how the young deals with the elder, what to do and when invited to an event, how social standards and relationships are regarded in the native speaking society. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the mothers in Longbourn were hunting for potential husbands for their daughters. One of them is Mrs. Bennet, "*whose only goal in life is to see her daughters married*" (Austen, 2007). Shaw analyzed disparities between social paradigms through three characters: Higgins, Pickering and Liz. Colonel Pickering, a military man, treated the flower girl with empathy while Higgins, the scientist treated everyone including Liz in a rough manner. As Dukore conceives, the Irish playwright alluded to the fact that "*a member of a particular social class is revealed not only by his speech and behavior, he is revealed also by the way in which he is treated*" (Dukore, 1973, p.288).

Classroom Activities

Since the benefits of utilizing literary characters are now discussed so it is logical to suggest some classroom activities that can be used to translate these to practice.

Write and Guess

Learners write about a certain character and the rest of the learners guess who it is based on the produced text. The characters could be selected from a single text, i.e. a novel, short story, play or from various works for the same activity.

Letter to a Character

Learners write a letter to a character telling him or her what they think about them and may express their opinion on a number of incidents or issues within the text.

Missing Character

Learners write a poster about a literary character that has gone missing. They include as much suitable information as they can. (Collie & Slater, 1987).

Making Predictions

Having read the first section of a text, the learners are asked to study a range of possible continuations of the story line. Before reading a fictional work, the learners read selected extracts and make predictions about the characters' personalities, role and other details. (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.7).

Character quotes

Here the learners work together to find out which characters said the selected quotes, figure out what that quote reveals about the character, what kind of personality would utter such words...etc. (Susan Jones, 2004).

Character Interview

Learners play the role of a character while other learners ask questions related to the content of the literary text.

Adjective Circles

Students choose from a list of adjectives which ones are most appropriate for describing a particular character (Lazar, 1993, p. 85) Students are to identify adjective of certain characters based on their reading.

Word association

To enrich learners' vocabulary, the teacher can give them a whole series of terms or expressions that must be assigned to specific features or characters in their book. (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.43).

Character' Diary

"As the long text unfolds, students are asked to keep a diary recording events and feelings...Their diaries contain their own observations and comments." (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.48). Learners may write their own notes and impressions on incidents, making sure to give detailed opinions on actions and reactions of the characters, too. This activity helps learners review contents of the text and boost their self-expression.

Sociogram

Learners work on a sociogram to demonstrate how various characters are related. They fill in the figure with appropriate names of characters or types of relationship: family (wife), social (friend, neighbor), or professional (boss, teacher...etc. (Lazar, 1993, p. 164).

Fortune Telling

Learners select characters and try to foretell what the characters' life is going to be like in the future. Learners are encouraged to come up with predictions that are likely to actually take place based on details from the same book. (Jackman, 2012).

Character Charades

Learners take turns impersonating different characters from the stories the class has read, including as many distinctive speech or behavioral clues as necessary. The class must guess which character it is. (Hooser, 2014).

Creative Conversation

Learners work together to make up a dialogue between the characters of in the text in an imaginary scene. (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.49).

Botticelli

Learners play this classic game using yes or no questions to guess a literary character that one student is thinking of. Steps are :

- 1- Teacher chooses a student to be on seat facing the class.
- 2- Teacher explains that the student on the seat is going to think of one of the characters that had been studied while the rest has to guess the character identity through yes or no questions.
- 3- The student in hot seat may pick a character on his own, or teacher decides which character he may think of. Alternatively, he may give the student a pile of slips with names of characters written face down to choose one from.
- 4- The class starts asking questions starting with simple ones such as: Is it a male or female? To more intricate ones such as: Is it one of the king's daughters?
- 5- Teacher gives equal opportunities to everybody.
- 6- The one who makes the right guess may be the next one to guess or may choose who is next.

Still there is no limit to the ideas that can be formed into activities. These ones can be used as they are or can be adjusted for new activities. Teachers are the ones who know which activity is most applicable to their students. So they are encouraged to adapt each activity to suit their teaching situation.

FINDINGS

This study attempts to explore the possibility of using literary characters in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Literature has been a popular medium of teaching English for several reasons. Literature and language are inseparable. Literature is a veritable portal to the culture of the second language. The more familiar the language learners are with the target foreign culture, the more appropriately they can use the language. When reading a selection of literary works, learners will be exposed to authentic language. They may find heaps of new vocabulary and treasures of novel expressions. Literature in TESOL is not only about language; it also arouses learners' curiosity and gives them raw material for discussion. Finally, readers of literature are better able to express themselves than those who are not.

TESOL teachers who plan to use literature in class have a selection of different genres : short stories, plays, novels and poetry. Those forms share common features, but at the same time have their own uniqueness. Teachers are advised to consider the nature of the course the type of students before starting using a particular form.

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