Different Literary Genres in Increasing Learner's Spoken Skills

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Abstract: This article aims at showing how different literary genres can contribute in developing namely, the role of context in interpretation and negotiation skills in increasing learner's spoken skills. It also indicates that different genres promote important conversational traits and also briefly discusses the importance of literature in learning a language. This article makes an attempt to explore the possibilities of developing speaking by using different genres of literature throwing some light on the role of context in interpretation and on negotiation skills, which are directly related to speaking.

INTRODUCTION

The use of unfamiliar and unexpected words or structure of a literary genre makes an imaginative text different from a purely referential piece of language use. The reader of literature is expected to use available evidences from the text in order to turn the text's apparent non-sense and lack of pattern into patterned interpretative sense. In any conversation, the role of context is a valuable component in interpretating a particular situation. Therefore, it is likely that one's interest in literature which is rich in context and language usage will be a valuable source in developing one's interpretative skills leading towards the betterment of conversational traits. Proper interpretation of the context is one important component of a successful conversation and therefore, even in one's thought process constantly tries to interpret situation from different angles as according to Leech (1974:4) 'the human abhors a vacuum of sense'.

LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIALS: WHY LITERATURE?

Language textbooks provide examples of usable referential language, which students are encouraged to adopt, follow and manipulate in a given series of contexts or situations. As a result, the learners may show the ability to negotiate some communicative/grammatical formulaic expressions to gain the requisite marks and to feel quite satisfied with such an achievement. But McRae (1991) points out that language is used for much more than simply conveying information. The absence of imaginative content limits the learners' imaginative involvement with the target language and leads to a one-dimensional learning achievement. On the other hand, representational materials going beyond the purely referential, bring 'imaginative interaction, reactions and response into play' (McRae, 1991). It is worth remembering here that genuine learning achievement goes far beyond mere mastery of functions and grammatical rules. Literature provides a special way of helping students interact with their surroundings and can produce an immensely satisfying effect.

In a language learning context, the meanings of words go beyond the referential level and take on new identities for a multiplicity of purposes. Fisher and Terry (1982) argue that words can help us learn if allowed the freedom of expression and identity to 'represent' or stand for something, rather than referring to a fixed concept or object, and literature is a particularly rich source of imaginative language.

A basic principle of the language-based approach is that there is no hard and fast dividing line between 'literary' and 'non-literary' texts. This approach seeks a 'way-in' to texts through language (Carter and Long, 1991). Following Maley (1989), the primary concern of this approach is to ensure the students' interaction with the text and with each other that will promote language learning. Nevertheless, Lazar (1993) points out that some texts may be so remote from the students' own experience that they might be unable to respond meaningfully to them. But this can be resolved by careful selection of texts.

CONVERSATIONAL TRAITS

The importance of the role of context in interpretation and also the necessity of negotiation in carrying out a fruitful discussion or conversation is mentioned in the introductory section. This section throws some light on the issues in a little detail.

The Context of Situation

Utterances in different contexts of situation convey very different messages. Firth (1957) is concerned to embed the utterance in the 'social context' and to generalise across meanings in specified social contexts. And Hymes (1962) holds the view that, 'The use of a linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings' (Hymes, 1962, quoted in Wootton, 1975:44). Lyons (1977:574ff) also points out that in different social contexts different terms of address are to be found. Literary texts, being rich in context, lead us to our development of thought or the fifth skill.

Even in the absence of information about the place and time of the original utterance, the speaker and his intended recipient, it is often possible to reconstruct at least some part of the physical context and to arrive at some interpretation of the text. Isard (1975:377) remarks that, 'communications do not merely depend on the context for their interpretation, they change that context'. In general, the more co-text there is, the more secure the interpretation is. A text creates its own context, and literary pieces are rich in co-texts that provide a positive effect on language development. The richness of context of literary texts helps us develop our thought process, or the fifth skill immensely, which is absolutely a necessary component in interpretation of a situation, idea or an event. We usually think before expressing our thoughts either in writing or through spoken words. Therefore, understanding of contexts is important in reacting to the particular situation.

Negotiation Skills: Negotiation of Meaning and Management of Interaction

Once the context is realised comes the question of implementing the understanding through negotiations. The negotiation of meaning is the skill of communicating ideas clearly. This includes the way participants signal understanding during an exchange. Widdowson (1978) uses the term 'convergence' when what is involved in conversation is mutual understanding rather than individual understanding. In developing discussion skills (through literature), the negotiation of meaning is an important factor. Multifarious topics in literary texts may well serve as meaningful resources to talk about. Thus, a literary piece may prove ideal for negotiating meaning by helping to bridge up the opinion-gap and by inspiring the expression of genuine feeling of the converses.

The management of interaction skill refers to the business of agreeing about the nest speaker and his/her topic of speech. Interaction management has at least two aspects: agenda management and turn-taking. The first refers to the choice of the topics of an exchange, the way topics are developed and how long a conversation should continue, while turn taking relates to the aspect of who speaks when and for how long. Literary pieces, especially those that include direct conversation or situation among characters usually reflect power relationship, can be useful source for replicating these aspects of interaction skills in the classroom. Moreover, s literature represents life and life's issues, the resource

of topics therein and ongoing discussion on them will definitely involve negotiation skills on the part of the discussants thus helping them improve these skills better.

Reflection of the Conversational Traits through Literature

The following section makes an attempt to show that literary genres, namely short stories, poetry, songs, advertisements and one-liners can be sued as resources for developing learner's speaking skills by initiating interpretative and negotiation skills in them. The rationale behind choosing these genres is to show that the less considered genres such as advertisements and one-liners could be as useful in the classroom as the universally established forms of literature such as, short stories and poetry.

Never Ending Story

Stories are a fundamental part of human experience. As Steiner (1968) points out, 'no tribe on earth so wretched that it does not express its dreams, its hopes, its ambitions, its fears in stories'. A student can study the original text after the 'simplified' version to make a comparison between how language can be richer/poorer, more complex/simpler, more or less modern, and so on.

Although Hedge (1985) champions graded readers which present reduced versions of original texts, McRae (1991:42) opines that a graded reader, despite having the advantage of containing all of the story, is 'a pale replica, a watered-down version, of the original'. Nevertheless, graded readers which are purposely written up to the level of the student, of course, are an immensely valuable source of representational material (McRae, 1991). Simplified readers can help to promote literary competence and develop inference skills as literary competence includes the ability to infer a message (Carter and Long, 1991).

Students in the classroom can be grouped and commence a debate on the issues related to language and context of the text. This will certainly engage them to instigate better interpretation in order to establish a point that will involve turn-taking and negotiation strategies.

A traditional approach to stories may also concentrate on who the characters are, or what happens in the passage. The following areas can offer clearer interaction with the text.

Prediction - What do you think might happen now and in future?
Discussion - Do you think X was right in doing so? Why, why not?
Evaluation of character - Think of some adjectives you would use to describe Y. Make sentences with the adjectives about Y following a story line.
Imaginative extension – What do you think X feels about Y? Elaborate your thoughts logically.

Of course, while reading, the individual reader will note different things and react differently, aiming at a clear message where another reader finds only description. The important point here is to see the range of possible elements to be explored. Contrasts within a text are always useful for exploitation: between the beginning and the end (what has happened?), between characters (any number, active and passive), between paragraphs and even between sentences. These contrasts very quickly take the reader beyond basic 'wh-' questions and open up areas of conflict and narrative tension that   lots of thought process and imagination leading to diverse interpretations. As pointed out by McRae (1991) contrasts, thus, perpetually invite the reader to discuss the themes of the passage, and to give concrete references from the text to back up analytical and interpretative affirmations, which are important in continuing communications.

Poetry and a Tale of Discovery

According to Kermode (1957: 128) poetry is 'concerned with intuited truth, not with what is discursively explicable by the reason'. The imaginative space which poetry allows the reader is exactly in the realm of 'intuited truth', and that is what gives the reader the widest range of intuitive possibilities. Many poems rich in language and imagery represent aspects of human experience in direct but intuitive and concise but rich terms. Poetic diction and the concept of the poet as a kind of seer contribute to the distancing of poetry from day-to-day reality, in the 'average' mind. But there are texts that can be approached as a simple functional message:

'This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me, they were delicious, so sweet and so cold.' (Carlos Williams)

When the poem is presented in a message form as presented above, it gives the reader a very simple everyday message, may be written on a piece of scrap paper, left on a tea-table for the host to read. If students are asked where the message could be found, what its function might be, etc., a whole range of ideas will emerge. To interpret and to discuss they have to use some of the components mentioned. The text is both a simple message and an open text: a note of apology, and a description of sensations of enjoyment. As the text does not look like a poem, so, if it is now presented as it was originally written, it will suddenly change from being 'not a poem' to being a poem and this new presentation will certainly promote further discussion. This is how learners are able to discover different tales that are yet to discover.

In order to keep discussion going, the learners have to make use of their 'experience' and 'knowledge of the world'. In this particular case, the intensity of longing and the after effect of the event when the reality takes the apologetic turn. Experience can also initiate questions such as:

Have you ever felt tempted before, what did you do then?
Do you think it is okay to behave this way?
What might be the reaction of the host after reading the note?
Do you think you should replace the fruit next time you turn up? Why/why not?
How would you have felt if someone would have done the same to you?
Knowledge of the world may initiate questions such as:
What is a 'plum?
Why do you have to apologise if you could eat it without permission, when the host is your friend or a near one?
What age group do you think the person belonged to? Was it a mature thing to eat the plums without permission?

Poems that relate universal personal experiences and focus on memory and the passing of time are all obvious advantages and show that a theme can be a very good source on which to base a discussion (Bassnett & Grundy, 1993). The poem 'Mending wall' by Robert Frost explores some of the attitudes we have towards our neighbours. Students can be asked about their experience with neighbours and to concentrate on problems that can occur with neighbours (Carter & Long, 1991). Thus, a theme-based approach can help students to relate the situation to their own experience and talk about it in order to develop their interpretative and conversational skills. They can also be asked imaginative situations made complicated by chance and then initiate solutions through negotiation. Reading the text aloud also allows contrasts between characters, actions and moods, which can be heightened by changes in pace or pitch (Carter & Long, 1991). It can help develop pronunciation of the learner as well.

Rhythm and Blues
According to McRae (1991), songs belong to the very best motivational texts to be found. They contain a basic element of 'story', or a character clash, a point of view or an engagement with a social or other issue, all of which can be very useful in initiating interpretation and discussion. Universal subjects such as, love, relationships, freedom, political repression, the sense of loss and bereavement, and minority views are of worldwide interest and can stimulate students' imagination and thoughts that obviously would relate to reality at some point. The entertaining element of a popular song is an added advantage in motivating the learner in the classroom.

An appropriate pick, for example, 'Another Brick in the Wall' by Pink Floyd deals with universal themes, such as, education, child psychology, trauma and war, etc., can be an excellent resource for opening up huge discussion related to personal as well as current issues.

Interested in Ads?
Advertisements are useful in the way they are short in length and yet use word–play, point of view and the receiver's affective suggestibility and help students to learn to read and react to propaganda or persuasion. Approaches to an advertisement should consider both the images and the text, so that

learners can examine and talk about interesting issues in order to enhance their skill of discussion and interpretation.

According to McRae (1991) the appeal of advertisements is a direct and often emotional one. In a mass-media dominated world of today, reading advertisements is a necessary talent in order to be able to understand the variety of subtle and less subtle means of persuasion. Thus, advertisements can help promote fuller language awareness and interpretation and also help develop initial interpretative skills. For example, the English expression: Say cheese - and smile! will consider at least two connotations. Firstly, 'Say cheese' is said to people whose photograph is being taken so that they look as if they are 'smiling'. This is because when someone utters the word 'cheese', automatically the gesture of the face becomes of a smiling one. The same utterance used as an advertisement would suggest that cheese itself is an enjoyable food that makes people smile.

Learners in the classroom can analyse advertisements keeping some general questions in view that are likely to initiate strong discussion promoting interpretative, argumentative and negotiation skills. For example:

What is the advertisement trying to do?
Who and what it is appealing to?
It's success or otherwise.
Are the play of words clear or obscure to the learners?
How does the advertisement compare with advertisements in the students' own language? and so on.

One-liners and Proverbs

Very brief quotations, or 'one-liners', can be very useful in stimulating students' interest in a subject, or in provoking discussion (agreeing/disagreeing, interpreting or evaluating, and so on). There are quotations which assert and affirm a truth, an opinion or a popular belief and which can be exploited in a number of ways. One-liners represent everyday experience and can, effectively and economically, put into words what people feel about things. This sense of common interest among learners can lead them to express thoughts and ideas through individual interpretation of the issue proposed (Carter & Long, 1991).

Moreover, one-liners in L2 are a good resource for comparison and contrast with one-liners in L1 are likely to initiate interesting discussion among the learners because with one-liners students almost immediately have to justify their opinions, reactions and responses. They have to go beyond the initial, try to formulate some kind of more considered response and fit in with others' reactions and responses, which themselves need to be negotiated and understood.

Proverbs too, like one-liners offer variants that allow for a range of reactions and responses, especially in the context of the L1/L2 contrast.

Following are some issues that could be discussed on one-liners, and proverbs in order to instigate discussion leading to better speaking:

What does the one-liner/proverb mean, and what does it refer to? (Comprehension/interpretation)
Do students agree or disagree with the statement? Why or why not? (Discussion)
How else the concept be expressed? (Reformulation)
Could they be used as stimulus for debate? (Extension)
Could they be used for further description (? (Archaic/poetic, etc.)
Could they be classified as humorous, true, irrelevant, old fashioned, etc.? (Evaluation)

Questioning raises the level of students' thinking and furthers their language development. Questions that do not demand a single short answer promotes discussion. Teachers can deliberately promote interaction among class members by asking them to verify or add to what someone has said without implying that the first response is incorrect. Sharing is an important part of emotional development and offers such potential for the development of thinking skills and conversational skills.

From the above discussion it can be stated that all the literary areas discussed until now, encompassing story to one-liners, can contribute to the development of learners' speaking. This is particularly true

with learners who do not have much exposure to a natural speaking environment. Even the self-learners, it is hoped, once they get into the habit of exploring the materials in the ways discussed above, keeping in mind the basic conversational norms discussed in this paper, will possibly become efficient conversationalists.

CONCLUSION

Different cultures and learning situations require different approaches and solutions. For that reason, theory must always be tested and tempered by practice. To start with there might be some resistance to the new ideas because of too much reliance on traditional materials and teaching methods but teachers should be encouraged to experiment with new methods and ideas in order to extract their beneficial effects. In this article as attempt has been made to present briefly some ideas for innovation with literature-based materials and methods.

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