

75. EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of literature regarding cultural awareness, personal reflection, and language skills

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a renewed interest concerning the usage of literary texts in EFL classrooms as the usage helps learners enhance not only their reading and writing skills but also speaking skills on the role of cultural awareness as well. This study investigates the supporting role of literature and illustrates learners' attitudes towards integrating literary texts while learning a second language. Convenience sampling technique was used, and the sample utilized in this research was randomly chosen 67 English major students at a public university in Turkey. The data of the study were collected through the questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1967) including 20 close-ended items. This study aims to demonstrate what kind of attitudes the second language learners have on the usage of literary texts in EFL classrooms and also whether the usage has any positive effects on raising cultural awareness.

Keywords: Literature, cultural awareness, language skills, literary texts, second language teaching

İngilizce öğrenenlerin kültürel farkındalık, kişisel fikir ve dil becerileri konusunda edebiyat kullanımına yönelik tutumları

Öz

Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretilen sınıflarda edebi metinlerin kullanımına ilişkin son yıllarda yeni bir ilgi vardır çünkü edebi metinler sadece öğrencilerin okuma ve yazma becerilerini değil, aynı zamanda konuşma becerilerini ve kültürel farklılıklarını da geliştirmelerine yardımcı olur. Bu çalışma, edebiyatın destekleyici rolünü araştırmakta ve öğrencilerin ikinci dil öğrenirken edebi metinleri bütünleştirmeye yönelik tutumlarını göstermektedir. Kolay ulaşılabilir durum örnekleme kullanılıp bu araştırmada kullanılan örnekleme, Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde İngilizce lisans eğitimi gören rastgele seçilen 67 öğrenci seçilmiştir. Sonuçlar, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretilen sınıflarda edebi metinlerin kullanımına ilişkin öğrencilerin ne tür tutumlara sahip olduklarını ve ayrıca edebi metinlerin kullanımının kültürel farkındalığı artırmada olumlu bir etkiye sahip olup olmadığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Edebiyat, kültürel farkındalık, dil becerileri, edebi metinler, ikinci dil öğretimi

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1. Introduction

Using literary texts in second language classrooms offers many advantages because they include a great number of authentic materials for language learners. These materials help the learners to be aware of the usage of the language in a real environment without having to reside in the country where the target language is spoken. To Brumfit and Carter (1986), literary texts are an integral part of a good language class. Taking into account the numerous advantages, literature provides a wide range of opportunities for language learners. The integration of literature while teaching languages can be motivating and encouraging for students. Obediat (1997) thought that literature in English will help students to express their thoughts fluently and clearly at an advanced level, to learn the features of modern literature, to teach how to use English language system in communication and to show how to use idiomatic expressions. The main aim of this research is to demonstrate the importance of using literature in the second language classroom and to reflect the effects of cultural awareness, personal reflection and language skills. Literary texts not only help students to make inferences and comments but also help to raise their cultural awareness because these texts draw a vivid portrait of the characters and events. As readers, the learners imagine the outside world and get a chance to see customs that they are not familiar with. Furthermore, as readers read the texts, it can be difficult to leave the things that they have learnt behind, and they want to exchange information to discover more. Critical discussion is an important part of second language learning, so literary texts help the learners to be active with the questions while they try to keep the necessary items in mind.

1.1 Previous Studies

In recent years, the use of literature in language teaching programs has taken on increased importance since people try to learn new languages mainly for communicative purposes. Communicative Language Teaching has become popular since 1970 because literary texts are full of authentic materials. The aim of Communicative Language Teaching is to teach to speak with the help of authentic materials (Aydinođlu, 2013). From that moment on, literature has widely been taken into account as being an easy way to find that kind of material.

After the 1980s, the role of literature or the increasing usage of authentic materials in language teaching cannot be ignored (Duff & Maley, 1991). According to Collie and Slater (1987), literature should be regarded as a significant source of authentic material, and considering language teachers, there have been a number of important reasons to use the literary texts in EFL programs. For Baird (1969), literature is the efficient use of language under appropriate circumstances. In this regard, Van (2009) considered that the usage of literature includes a lot of advantages in terms of vocabulary, language richness and grammar, and he thought that it helps to raise cultural awareness and foster critical thinking. To Collie and Slater (1987), the usage of literary texts provides a great chance to see the suitable setting of the second language. To them, literature provides an abundant and incredibly diverse collection of written material that is significant in that it addresses essential human themes and is durable rather than transient. Students who read literary texts also have to deal with language that is meant for native speakers. As a result, they become more familiar with a variety of linguistic forms, uses, and norms of the written mode, such as irony, exposition, argument and narration (Collie and Slater, 1987). According to Gillian Lazar (1993: 15), the usage of literature is very important in many ways, and she supported her claim stating “students of English may experience a real sense of achievement at tackling literary materials in the classroom.” Long (1986) put forward the idea that literary texts include genuine language activities. Barnett (1989: 145) pointed out the abundance of authentic materials in the

literary texts stating, “authentic texts are vital; they motivate students, offer a real context, transmit the target language culture, and prepare students to read outside the classroom.” By reading and analyzing literary works, it is possible to comprehend general information on real life experiences (Türker, 1991)

Literary texts not only help learners to think deeply but also provide imagining of the things that they are not familiar with. Helton, C.A, J. Asamani and E.D. Thomas (1998) expressed that reading a novel has a number of benefits as it helps to visualize things happening through the story and trigger learners to improve their linguistic and communicative language skills as well as encourage them to be a reader. Lazar (1993: 15-19) thought “literature can help to stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness.” In line with this view, Rodger (1983: 46) said ‘the words on the paper remain mere words on paper until a reader actively engages with them as intellectually and sensitively as his knowledge of life and his command of the language will allow’. As pointed by Custodio, B., & Sutton, M. (1998), texts let students consider, evaluate and denounce. In accordance with Rodger’s view, Duff and Maley (2007: 6) expressed their ideas on the usage of authentic materials saying “reading and interpreting involves a deeper level of mental processing, a greater involvement and response.” Being a tool to help learners to convey their ideas in a creative way, it forces them to think critically. There is an endless world for the learners in the literary pieces, hence they can go beyond and without restrictions they can have a chance to get linguistic knowledge (McKay, 1982). They asserted while reading a kind of literary text, learners therefore flourish their language fluency and competence as a result of getting involved in the written material. The usage of literature not only enhances the interaction between readers and writers but also contributes to the reading proficiency, so learners try to interpret the text for deeper meanings (Widdowson, 1979). It can be said that there are linguistic and conceptual interactions, that is to say, the reader goes beyond the text while decoding it and comprehending the concepts (Mckay, 1982). In this sense, literature can be seen as one of the most useful tool for fostering the kinds of reading experiences and skill-building that some kind of course books are unable to deliver (Kramsch, 1993; Hess, 1999). Predominantly, it is said that the best way to learn a second language is to visit the country, where it is spoken to interact with native people; however, literary texts provide learners to see and feel different worlds without going there, so it helps to make a connection between the language and culture since the second language learners can be “aware of the social, political, historical, or cultural events happening in a particular society” through the literary pieces (Floris, 2004:2). Sarıçoban and Çalışkan (2011: 9) stated “when culture is so central, it will not be logical to separate it from language. It is within the language or, it is reflected via language.” Therefore, there is a close connection between culture and language. The usage of literary texts makes learning of culture easier. Texts can be used to show different daily expressions of the language, so Greenslate (2006) highlighted that literary texts such as letters, essays or poems help people to reflect experiences and also demonstrate the world. For him, teachers should try to find the connections and permit them to figure out, and then, teachers will see the difference regarding the use of language (Greenslate, 2006). To Nuttall (1982: 11), reading needs active involvement, and he says “reading is an interactive process-as conversation is-because both reader and writer depend on one another” Since both the reader and the writer are dependent upon one another, reading is a participatory process just like speaking is. As learners become aware of the usage of language, without noticing they gain awareness of the culture itself. Literary texts include some basic subjects like love, hate, social problems, war and justice. They attract the attention of learners with universal themes, so it helps them to use imagination and creativity. As it was claimed by Emmitt and Komesaroff (2003), attitudes, ideas, values and traits are transmitted to the people through language learning process. Taga (1999) thought that culture and language are closely connected to each other because culture can be conveyed by language.

While reading texts, learners try to guess the end and choose a favorite character to support. The text draws the reader. The more contact the learner has, the more they get from the text because literary texts give its learners a chance to learn new vocabulary and expressions in real setting. Collie and Slater (1987) were in favor of using literary texts in language teaching such as travel timetables, city plans, advertisements, newspapers, so that the learners would become familiar with the natural context and culture and learn different linguistic functions that the text conveys. The learning materials provide a lot of information about characters, culture, and history that the students are not familiar with, so they discover some connections and then attempt to understand the book in a more detailed way (Collie & Slater, 1987). The diverse characters from different classes and ethnics raise the awareness on culture (Rony, 2014). Their involvement into the text helps them to gain more confidence and improve their critical thinking, and through this process, they can increase their understanding regarding the language and culture. Authentic materials are necessary to convey meaning and teach genuine expressions in classrooms, and these materials can be an important and motivating source for speaking and writing in the target language. To Hence (1985), students' vocabulary and structure knowledge can be enhanced by reading literary materials. As claimed by Povey (1972), literature will provide a wide range of linguistic sources for language users showing the different versions of words. In line with this view, Littlewood (1986) stated that by means of literature, language learners are exposed to the usage of target language and so, they can gain some experiences through their responses regarding the texts. Using literary texts to demonstrate the pragmatic competence is also useful in terms of showing how a character is or is not able to use the language according to their needs. A study, for instance, shows that an autistic character is not able to use the language in context with several examples (Tulgar, 2021: 240). According to Tulgar, literary texts have the potential to shape the perceptions of a society. Since pragmatic competence is a vital skill in conveying the message, representations of pragmatic failures in literary texts can easily demonstrate the importance of the skill through dialogues between neurotypicals and neurodivergent characters (Tulgar, 2021).

1.2 Significance of the study

This paper will reveal the common attitudes of English Language Teaching (ELT) students towards the usage of literature and will provide an important data regarding the importance of using literary texts while learning a second language. Therefore, when the results are taken into consideration, literature can be added or the number of the courses can be increased in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

1.3 Research Questions

This study attempts to analyze the importance of the usage of literature regarding cultural awareness, personal reflection, and language skills. For this purpose, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are the reflections of language learners on literature?
2. What are the consequences of literature regarding cultural awareness, personal reflection, and language skills in Turkish EFL undergraduate students?

2. Method

The study applied a quantitative research design to collect information from the students through a survey. Convenience sampling technique was used, and the sample utilized in this research was English major undergraduate students of Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education, department of English

Language Teaching at Atatürk University. The research was conducted in the 2021 Fall term. 67 ELT students answered the questionnaire after taking the compulsory courses English Literature I and English Literature II during their second year at university.

2.2 Instruments for data collection

2.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1967) including 20 close-ended items with 1- strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- neutral, 4- agree, and 5- strongly agree. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, and the highest score is for the statement “*Literary texts enlighten the learner’s knowledge about other cultures*”, while the lowest score is for the statement “*Literary texts sharpen listening skills*”. The written permission to use the questionnaire called *The role of literature and literary texts in an EFL context: Cultural awareness and language skills* was taken from the corresponding author Kampeeraphab Intanoo (2020) (See Appendix 1).

3. Results

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through the statistics program, *IBM Statistical Software for Social Sciences* (SPSS). The results for each statement in the questionnaire with all 20 items are presented below. For the mean scores, the scores between 3 and 5 are considered highly effective and the scores between 2.5 and 3.49 are considered moderately effective and the scores between 1.00 and 2.49 are considered less effective. According to these categorizes, the results will be interpreted in the discussion section.

First of all, the general results for each statements are given in Table 1.

Table 1. General Results for the Learners’ Attitudes

Statement	\bar{x}	SD
Language Skills	3.9	0.993
Personal Reflections	3.922	1.057
Cultural Awareness	4.433	0.872
Total	4.085	0.974

From Table 1, it is seen that the highest score is for the statement “Literary texts improve learners’ cultural awareness” (\bar{x} =4.433, SD=0.993). When all three elements are considered in descending order, Cultural Awareness has (\bar{x} =4.433, SD=0.872), Personal Reflections (\bar{x} =3.922, SD=1.057) and “Literary texts improve learners’ language skills” (\bar{x} =3.9, SD=0.993) respectively.

The results for the items under the statement “Literary texts improve learner’s language skills” are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Results for Learners’ Language Skills

Items	Statement	\bar{x}	SD
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1	Literary texts enhance reading skills	4.45	0.875
2	Literary texts are one of the main resources of vocabulary acquisition	4.21	0.946
3	Literary texts enrich critical thinking skills	4.22	0.935
4	Literary texts strengthen writing skills	4.27	0.947
5	Literary texts improve speaking skills	3.70	1.128
6	Literary texts develop social/communication skills	3.81	1.019
7	Literary texts sharpen listening skills	3.31	1.104
Total		3.99	0.993

According to the findings taken from Table 2, it can be understood that students had positive attitudes towards literature regarding to the benefits of reading skills ($\bar{x}=4.45$, $SD=0.875$). However, when the other statements towards the language skills are taken into consideration, the lowest score is for the statement “Literary texts sharpen listening skills” ($\bar{x}=3.31$, $SD=1.104$).

Table 3. Results for Learners’ Personal Reflection

	Statement	\bar{x} ,	SD
8	Literary texts enhance reading skills	4.13	1.290
9	Literary texts are one of the main resources of vocabulary acquisition	4.18	1.072
10	Literary texts enrich critical thinking skills	4.22	0.935
11	Literary texts strengthen writing skills	4.19	0.941
12	Literary texts improve speaking skills	3.54	1.078
13	Literary texts develop social/communication skills	3.87	0.998
14	Literary texts sharpen listening skills	3.37	1.085
Total		3.922	1.057

Table 3 which is concerning about Learner’s Personal Reflection; the statement “Literary texts enrich thinking skills” is ranked first ($\bar{x}=4.22$, $SD=0.935$), but the statement related to the listening skills took the lowest scores ($\bar{x}=3.37$, $SD=1.085$) by most of the applicants.

Table 4. Results for Learners’ Cultural Awareness

Items	Statement	\bar{x} ,	SD
15	Literary texts enlighten the learner’s knowledge about other cultures	4.59	0.822
16	Literary texts develop learners to understand about other cultures	4.50	0.932
17	Literary texts assist learners to accept different backgrounds and cultures	4.44	0.844
18	Literary texts encourage learners to tolerate cultural differences	4.43	0.802
19	Literary texts encourage learners to accept cultural differences	4.28	0.997
20	Literary texts help the development of intercultural sensitivity	4.36	0.835

Total	4.43	0.872
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Table 4 illustrates the findings regarding Learners' Cultural Awareness, and, it can be seen that enlightened learners' knowledge about other cultures ($\bar{x}=4.59$, $SD=0.822$) at a high level. The statement "Literary texts encourage learners to accept cultural differences" belongs to the group which has the lowest score ($\bar{x}=4.28$, $SD=0.997$).

4. Discussion

This study hopes to see the impact on how literary texts are used in EFL classes. The results suggest that the research was precious and useful, and thus, literary texts should be included in the second language teaching curriculum. When the results are compared to the findings taken from Isariyawat, C. et. al. (2020), it can be seen that Thai students think literary texts are more effective on language skills, while Turkish students think it has an important contribution to cultural awareness. For the first research question of the study "to examine the reflections of language learners on literature", the results illustrate that literary texts have an important effect on cultural awareness; therefore, it helps learners improve their knowledge on other cultures and raise their tolerance to respect them. When the answers are taken into consideration, literary texts facilitate social and communication skills along with enhancing reading and critical thinking skills. The findings of this study corroborate those of Icoz (1992) and Wu (1998), who found that using literature in the classroom had a positive and significant impact. They discovered that literature helped students develop a better sense of language, attracted their attention, piqued their interest in reading, and improved their language proficiency because it helped them to demonstrate the use of a wide variety of subtle vocabulary words as well as complex and precise syntax.

The research findings reveal the advantage of using literary texts in EFL classrooms as the texts remarkably provide different usages of vocabulary in context. Students can see the usage of different vocabulary while reading a literary text, and it gives a chance to interpret and figure out the text being an active part of the literary text. A persistent exposure to the literary texts as a whole also results in a reader having a larger vocabulary and approaching composition with a certain ease and confidence (Smith, 2017). When students start to recognize the range and depth of the language they are attempting to acquire and start utilizing some of that potential themselves, they also become more productive and adventurous (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). On one side, literature enhances language skills by providing authentic materials and on the other side, students can be active during the teaching process as literature helps students go beyond the text and find different hidden meanings. Literature-based training encourages students to think deeply and share their opinions about a tale rather than pressuring them to provide canned responses to simple questions about a story (Perles, 2017). Keshavarzi (2012) emphasized it stating that "the piece of literary work entertains and opens the eyes of students as they see how other people think, interpret, and act on a variety of things, especially those things that ESL students are familiar with", so it can be inferred that literature reflects the culture. Kiefer (2007) highlighted the importance of using texts and he stated that children should be taken inside a character to better understand why that person behaves in certain ways, and they should also be taken outside of themselves to think about their own actions. Based on the research findings, it can be understood that the usage of literature has a great effect on culture as it reflects a lot of traces related to people, traditions and differences. The integrated use of literature and literary texts in an EFL classroom allows learners to improve their linguistic abilities while also increasing their knowledge of culture (Isariyawat, C. Yenphee, C. & Intanoo, K., 2020). The findings indicate that the students think the usage of literary

texts develop their language skills, personal involvement and cultural awareness, so literary texts are useful in terms of second language acquisition. Moreover, analyzing the texts involves students' active participation, so it encourages them to ask and criticize the things that they have learnt. Reading literature can be seen as a dynamic process that requires readers to recall, locate, and posit memories from the past in order to interpret the text. Different readers will react to literature in different ways, and if a piece is read again, they will respond to it differently. Every time they read a document, readers interpret it using their own personal histories, knowledge, and belief systems (Gibson, 2012). They gain knowledge in textual analysis, reader/writer interaction, how to convey a message, and how to analyze a piece (Langer, 1997). On the other hand, more studies are necessary to approve these findings.

5. Conclusion

This study has been conducted to illustrate the attitudes of EFL students towards the usage of literary texts. The participants of the study are the EFL students who took English Literature I and English Literature II courses during their second year at Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education, department of English Language Teaching at Atatürk University in Erzurum during the 2020-2021 academic year. When the results are examined, it can be concluded that the participants have positive attitudes considering the usage of literature in English Language programs. Students would be encouraged by the use of literature and literary texts in EFL lessons. When the preferences of the EFL students towards the usage of literature are taken into account, it can be inferred that literary texts enrich vocabulary, grammar and reading, and they also help to raise cultural awareness and develop intercultural sensitivity against the other cultures.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Atatürk University Ethical Committee of Social and Human Sciences, December 12, 2021.

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Appendix

EFL Learners' Attitudes towards the Use of Literature Regarding Cultural Awareness, Personal Reflection, and Language Skills

Questionnaire

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of literature and literary texts in an EFL context in order to help students raise cultural awareness and develop language skills. This questionnaire asks about your personal opinions on the contributions of the usage of literature and literary texts. Do NOT write your name or address because your responses will be anonymous, and they will be only used for academic purposes. Your participation is very important to collect data, and it will take only about 10 minutes. Thank you for your cooperation and taking the time to answer the questions in advance.

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Item s	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Literary texts improve learner's language skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2	Literary texts enhance reading skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3	Literary texts are one of the main resources of vocabulary acquisition	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4	Literary texts enrich critical thinking skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
5	Literary texts strengthen writing skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6	Literary texts improve speaking skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
7	Literary texts develop social/communication skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
7	Literary texts sharpen listening skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Literary texts improve learner's personal reflection						
8	Literary texts enhance reading skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
9	Literary texts are one of the main resources of vocabulary acquisition	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
10	Literary texts enrich critical thinking skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
11	Literary texts strengthen writing skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

12	Literary texts improve speaking skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
13	Literary texts develop social/communication skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
14	Literary texts sharpen listening skills	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Literary texts improve learner's cultural awareness						
15	Literary texts enlighten the learner's knowledge about other cultures	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
16	Literary texts develop learners to understand about other cultures	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
17	Literary texts assist learners to accept different backgrounds and cultures	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
18	Literary texts encourage learners to tolerate cultural differences	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
19	Literary texts encourage learners to accept cultural differences	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
20	Literary texts help the development of intercultural sensitivity	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)