

74. Integrating novels and short stories into English language teaching

İlkin BAŞAR¹

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Abstract

Novels and short stories can be seen as motivating and authentic materials in English Language classes (Lazar, 1993). It is because novels and short stories are rich in not only language, but also, cultural aspects of the foreign language. Therefore, novels and short stories may act as great sources of language and culture in English as a foreign language classes. The language instructors' role is important in teaching English through these sources. By the language instructors, the level and needs of the language learners need to be taken into consideration while selecting and using these literary texts. Researchers such as Byram (1989) and Brown(2007) claim that it is not any possible to separate language and culture from each other, for this reason novels and short stories can be seen as great sources both for language and for culture of the target language. Thanks to literary translation, it really is possible to be aware of other cultures of the world with the help of novels and short stories' translations. In the following paper, it is aimed to show how using novels and short stories in EFL classes may develop students' knowledge of English while increasing their cultural awareness. In that sense, togetherness of language and culture in language teaching, novels and short stories in the language classroom and ways to overcome cultural problems while using novels and short stories in EFL classes will be presented.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Novels, Short Stories, English as a Foreign Language Classes

İngilizce öğretimine roman ve kısa hikayeleri katmak

Öz

Roman ve kısa öyküler İngilizce sınıflarında motive edici ve özgün materyaller olarak görülebilir (Lazar, 1993). Bunun sebebi, romanlar ve kısa öyküler sadece dil açısından değil, aynı zamanda yabancı dilin kültürel yönleri açısından da zengindir. Bu nedenle yabancı dil olarak İngilizce sınıflarında roman ve kısa öyküler, dil ve kültürel öğeler açısından iyi birer kaynak olarak görülebilirler. Bunun yanı sıra, bu kaynaklar aracılığıyla İngilizce öğretiminde, dil öğretmenlerinin rolü de önemlidir. Dil öğretmenleri tarafından, bu edebi metinlerin seçiminde ve bu materyallerin kullanımında, dil öğrencilerinin dil düzeyinin ve ihtiyaçlarının göz önünde bulundurulması gerektiği de unutulmamalıdır. Byram(1989) ve Brown (2007) gibi araştırmacılar dil ve kültürü birbirinden ayırmanın mümkün olmadığını savunurlar, bu sebeple yabancı dil olarak İngilizce sınıflarında roman ve kısa öyküler hem dil hem de hedef dilin kültürünü içeren önemli kaynaklar olarak görülebilir. Edebi çeviri sayesinde gerçekten de romanlar ve kısa öyküler aracılığıyla dünyanın diğer kültürlerinden haberdar olmak mümkündür. Aşağıdaki makalede, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce sınıflarında roman ve kısa öykü kullanımının, öğrencilerin kültürel farkındalıklarını artırırken

¹ Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, YDYO, İngilizce Mütercim ve Tercümanlık (İstanbul, Türkiye), ilkinbasar@aydin.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1297-6356 [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 12.08.2023-kabul tarihi: 23.10.2023; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1379410]

İngilizce bilgilerini de geliřtirdiđini göstermek amaçlanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, dil öğretiminde dil ve kültürün birlikteliđi, dil sınıfında roman ve kısa öyküler ve yabancı dil olarak İngilizce sınıflarında roman ve kısa öykü kullanırken karşılaşılabilecek kültürel problemleri ve bu problemleri çözmenin yolları sunulacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce Öğretimi, Romanlar, Kısa Hikayeler, Yabancı Dil olarak İngilizce Sınıfları

1.Introduction

Literature plays a crucial role in teaching four basic skills which are reading, writing, listening and speaking. Lazar (1993, p.16) says that “literature can provide students with access to the culture of the people whose language they are studying.” For Lewis (1999, p.197) there are three main reasons to study literature with foreign language learners: “1) Literature improves a learner’s language, provided that texts are chosen according to the learner’s level. 2) Literature is a source of information. In the texts, are messages to be decoded by readers. 3) Literature is entertainment. It is like watching a play or listening to a concert.”

Working on literary texts in language classes is a great opportunity for the language learners to become familiar with the target culture. Actually, it is not only the target culture they get familiar with, but also, they can get familiar with other cultures from all over the world depending on the text they are studying. Novels and short stories on the other hand can be seen as great sources that helps learners to develop their linguistic knowledge. Therefore, studying novels and short stories in English as a foreign language class helps learners to become aware of the social and historical background of the target and other cultures while developing their linguistic competence. In that sense, in this paper, the following topics will be introduced: togetherness of language and culture in language teaching, novels and short stories in the language classroom, ways to overcome cultural problems while using novels and short stories in EFL classes.

2.Togetherness of language and culture in language teaching

It is not possible to make the second language learning process complete without analysing the cultural elements and teaching them to the foreign language learners. Language and culture cannot be separated as they shape and reflect each other. The relationship of language and culture are studied by so many scholars such as Byram (1989), Kramsch (1998), Harklau(1999) and Brown(2007); they all claim that they are not separable. For Brown (2007, p.189) “A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” According to Harklau (1999, p.109) “Language is inextricably bound up with culture. Cultural values are both reflected by and carried through language. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that representation of culture implicitly and explicitly enters into second language teaching.” Kramsch (1993, p.1) claims that: “Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hardwon communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.”

For the foreign language learners, to be able to fully understand the target language, the culture of the target language also needs to be studied. Otherwise, some parts of the target language will not make sense for language learners. For instance, because of the religious references in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or James Joyce's *Dubliners*, some parts of the literary texts would be impossible for language learners to understand properly. If some texts that belong to post-colonial literature are being studied in the language classroom, then the learners will need to read and study the history of colonization. For instance, to be able to fully comprehend Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, language learners' linguistic skills will not be enough, they also need to study the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. In other words, it can be said that studying the culture of the target language expands the cultural knowledge of the language learners. Learning about another culture gives language learners an opportunity to compare and contrast their own culture with the target one, by doing so their awareness of cultures increases and it helps to develop their social and linguistic competence. As literary texts reflect real lives, and cultures of people, it will be a great choice for language instructors to use them as authentic materials in their language classes. Cultural interaction is a way to create student interest in the story. Obviously, not to lose the language learners during the reading process, cultural background needs to be provided at the very beginning of the reading process by language instructors. Comparing and contrasting cultural background of the story with their own culture will raise awareness of learners towards the text they're reading and it will help their linguistic development as well.

All in all, without teaching culture, a foreign language cannot be taught at its most level. As Lazar (1993) suggests, literary texts can be seen as good sources of cultural elements and help learners to understand other cultures. As many researchers such as Byram(1989) and Brown(2007) claim that culture and language cannot be separated, integrating literary texts especially novels and short stories into ELT would be useful for the language instructors to develop language learners' social and linguistic competence. By doing so, language learning process might be complete. Providing cultural information for language learners in pre-reading and while reading phases would also help learners to overcome the cultural burdens that they might have during the reading process.

3.Short stories in the language classroom

Short stories in language classes provide a great amount of language and cultural knowledge for language learners. According Erkaya (2005) short stories can be used to teach four skills to language learners and improve their vocabulary and grammar as well. Erkaya (2005)points out that short stories are also good for the learners to learn about the target culture and their way of life. As short stories are shorter than novels, it will be easier for the language instructor to deal with the length of the text, even the whole story can be covered in the classroom time depending on the syllabus. Understanding the cultural background of the short story can stand as a burden for language learners as it is crucial to provide that information for them at the very beginning of the reading process. For Lazar (1993) the main differences between a novel and a short story are their length obviously, and the cast of the characters, methods of narration and the complexity of the plot. They also have so many features in common as they both have a chronological sequence of events.

Short stories can be seen as great sources for understanding the target culture and their way of life. Edgar Allan Poe's short stories from 19th century's American literature, such as *The Cask of Amontillado* and *the Tell Heart* are both rich in language and culture for the language learners. Reading and analysing these short stories will also help learners to develop their critical reading and thinking skills. James Joyce's *Dubliners* from 20th century's Irish literature gives the readers a wide perspective of Irish society

and culture as well. To make the most of the reading process, related activities prepared by the language instructor are crucial. For Lazar (1993, pp.83-84) the main reasons for pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities are as follows:

Pre-reading activities

- helping students with cultural background
- stimulating student interest in the story
- pre-teaching vocabulary

While-reading activities

- helping students to understand the plot
- helping students to understand the characters
- helping students with difficult vocabulary
- helping students with style and language

Post-reading activities

- helping students to make interpretations of the text
- understanding the narrative point of view
- follow-up writing activities
- follow-up fluency practice

In that case, if a short story is being used in the language classroom, first of all the aims of the language instructor in using that short story should be decided in a clear way. The level of the students, their interests and needs also need to be taken into consideration by the language instructor before selecting the text. The possible problems that might be encountered while using that text with language learners need to be indicated by the instructors. The possible problems might occur in different forms. As short stories might contain cultural elements of the target language, the best phase to solve them is the pre-reading phase. To help language learners with the cultural background, they can be asked to prepare power point presentations about the cultural background of the literary text, or presentations about the cultural background of the text can be prepared or presented by the language instructors depending on the class level. Obviously, introducing the author of the literary text will also help learners in understanding the author's language. Some other works of the same author can be mentioned and presented and similarities in his/her works can be discussed. Pre-reading phase is one of the most crucial phases to help learners with the cultural background, to stimulate student interest and to teach the unknown vocabulary. The volume of the unknown vocabulary especially in novels and short stories can be demotivating for language learners as it really slows down their reading process; and they might even lose their interest in the story. Therefore, at the very beginning of the reading process presenting and explaining these words to the learners might be the best idea. Actually, some reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, and guessing from the context should be taught to the language learners as well. They need to be reminded that they do not need to look up each unknown word in a dictionary.

4. Novels in the language classroom

Using novels in English Language Teaching has always been one of the best language sources that accepted by language educators. It has been discussed that using novels in EFL classes develop students' knowledge of English as they provide rich linguistic input. According to Teranishi (2015), language learners can improve their linguistic skills while studying the novels. Lazar (1993) claims that novels are

beneficial for language learners' educational and linguistic development. The benefits of using novels in language classes cannot be denied. Asefa (2017, p.1815) suggests the following educational benefits of using novels in language classes:

- Develops the advanced level readers' knowledge about different cultures and different groups of people,
- Increases students' motivation to read owing to being an authentic material,
- Offers real life/real life like settings,
- Gives students the opportunity to make use of their creativity,
- Improves critical thinking skills,
- Paves the way for teaching the target language culture,
- Enables students to go beyond what is written and dive into what is meant.

Novels can be seen as useful sources of the target culture as literature reflects culture. Literature is life itself; in that sense literature, language and culture cannot be considered apart. They reflect and shape each other. Novels as literary texts provide a valuable cultural context for the language learners. For the language learners, reading and studying novels can be seen as a good opportunity to learn about other cultures while they are developing their language skills. For instance, while studying *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, they get a chance to learn about the Victorian era of the English literature as Dicken's novel is a direct reflection of the English society in those times. One another example is James Joyce's *Dubliners*. His collection of short stories gives learners the picture of Irish society in the 20th century. All the cultural, religious, and historical references in his work brings the readers to the author and to another culture. Of course, with the related pre-reading, while reading and post reading activities, novels can be used as great sources to develop learners' linguistic knowledge while developing their cultural competence.

When it comes to selecting the correct material for the language learners, there are so many factors that need to be taken into consideration. First of all, language educators need to know their students very well. The students' age group, their language proficiency, their familial and cultural backgrounds, their interests and needs need to be known by the language educators. Otherwise, the materials will not make sense for the learners. The following is a checklist of criteria for choosing literary texts suggested by Lazar (1993, p.56):

- Type of Course
 - Level of students
 - Students' reasons for learning English
 - Kind of English required
 - Length/intensity of course
- Type of Students

- Age
- Intellectual maturity
- Emotional understanding
- Interests/Hobbies
- Cultural background
- Linguistic proficiency
- Literary background
- Other Text-Related Factors
 - Availability of texts
 - Length of text
 - Exploitability
 - Fit with syllabus

The checklist suggested by Lazar (1993) can be used while selecting novels as well.

The language instructors need to be well aware of their aims of the class and choose the novel accordingly. If the novel is parallel with the course objectives, then it can be really beneficial to language learners. It is really one good option to find the graded-readers of some of the novels if the students' level is not appropriate to study the original text. Also, there are so many teacher- friendly web-sites that provide some short videos of the English novels for zero beginners or elementary students.

Language teachers might encounter some problems while using novels in language classes. The unknown vocabulary because of the descriptive and figurative language of the novel is a common one. Even in the graded-readers, a serious amount of unknown vocabulary can be encountered. The volume of those usages can cause learners to lose their interest and motivation towards the story. The best phase to solve this problem can be seen as the pre-reading phase. With the help of related pre-reading activities, learners can be presented the new vocabulary and get familiar with these at the very beginning of the reading process. Lazar (1993) suggests teaching the language learners reading for gist and guessing the meaning from the context and giving them a kind of glossary during their reading process. Learners can be asked to prepare their own glossaries as well which will work better for their long memory. Learning new reading strategies such as skimming, scanning and guessing from the context may help learners to develop their critical reading skills as well. This may also develop their critical writing skills. The length of the novel is another problem that needs to be sorted out by the language teacher. Obviously, the language teacher needs to take into consideration the type of the course he/she is teaching and the class hours he/she has per week before choosing the novel for his/her students. Lazar (1993) suggests asking learners to read some chapters of the novel at home and presenting them to their classmates during classes. That idea might help to deal with the length of the novel because of the limited class hours and time issues.

5. Ways to overcome cultural problems while using novels and short stories in EFL classes

Novels can be seen as the reflections of life itself. Especially in English literature in the 19th century, novelists such as Charles Dickens, Bronte Sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot wrote about everyday life of England of those times. Dickens, who started his literary career in 1833, portrayed the social problems of the British society in the Victorian era. In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, while we

meet one of the most romantic love stories in English literature, we also have a chance to see the problems women have in the society in those times. When we have a look at the first half of the 20th century, Irish author James Joyce's *Dubliners* stands as a true reflection of Irish society. *Dubliners*, the collection of 15 short stories, depicts the lives of Irish people of those times.

In novels and short stories, language learners have a chance to see the characters' experiences that might be similar to the experiences of people in real life. It is a chance for the language learners to see and understand about other cultures and societies. While choosing an appropriate novel or short story to use with the language learners, one of the most important factors that needs to be taken into consideration by the language instructor is the volume of cultural items in the text. One another thing is all the cultural items in the text need to be analysed by the language instructor and the possible problems that the students might encounter need to be solved. As culture is a wide term, cultural items that the language learners might encounter in a novel or short story can be the usage of proverbs, idioms, different social roles, objects that exist in the concerning society but does not in the other, historical references, religious references, beliefs, traditions; and the list might go on.

Obviously, the cultural items that might cause problems regarding language learners' comprehension in the novel need to be recognized by the instructor first. With the related pre-reading activities, learners can get familiar with these cultural references. For Lazar (1993) personalizing, providing explanations, asking students to infer cultural information, making cultural comparisons, making associations, providing cultural background information, and extension activities are some possible strategies for overcoming cultural problems in language classes.

One another important step to solve cultural problems is the pre-reading phase and also while-reading phase. With the help of related pre-reading and while-reading activities, language learners can be helped with the cultural background of the novel.

6. Conclusion

Novels and short stories can be seen as the useful sources of both culture and language in English as a foreign language classes. Language instructors have a significant role in teaching English through literary texts in English as a foreign language classes. First of all, the aim of using the related novels or short stories needs to be determined by the language instructors and need to be prepared related pre-reading, while reading and post reading activities. The level and needs of the students always need to be taken into consideration while selecting and using these materials. The simplified or graded versions of the literary text can also be used with lower levels. It should not be forgotten that using novels and short stories in language classes may widen language learners' perspective towards other cultures and raises their awareness to related cultural issues while developing their linguistic competence.

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