

Language through literature

Dr. RS Baskkaran

Omar Al Mukhtar University, Al-Gubba, Libya

Abstract

This research paper attempts to explain Teaching Language through Literature concept. Ben Jonson wrote “Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all time” Shakespeare is for all time using primary sources in the present day class room. Shakespeare’s play as a literary material for language teaching and learning. It is language through literature concept of teaching and learning. The benefits of this approach, though, are equally evident in the teaching and learning process outcome. One of our aims in teaching literature is to encourage learners to feel that they can read and enjoy books on their own. Literature is an authentic material. We believe that students learn best using a performance based methodology and that performance can build a personal connection with the text that traditional teaching methods may not. Performance— which is not the same thing as “acting”—activates the imagination.

Keywords: language, though, literature, concept, teaching, performance

Introduction

What sort of literature is suitable for use with language learners? Shakespeare dramas are relevant to the life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learners. Shakespeare’s stories have always proved fascinating to students. Reading literary works exposes the student to many functions of the written language. Language enrichment is one benefit often sought through literature. A literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader. Shakespeare dramas are authentic literary material. One of the main reasons might be that literature offers bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is important in the sense it says something about fundamental human issues, and which is ending rather ephemeral. It is essential to make Shakespeare relevant, fun and accessible. There are so many good units and resources for teaching Shakespeare, the challenge is selecting the right one, for the right moment, and right time. Employing audio recordings really assists students to engage with the play as performance and it is certainly welcome relief from exclusively ‘reading around the class’ which can be fun, depending on the class and scene. Film adaptations can really spice up a traditional textual study, especially when employing clips along the way, as the play unfolds, rather than watching the entire film. The plots and characters still engage students as long as they can overcome the initial challenge of the language. Skilful teachers can make learning about blank verse, prose fun and achievable. Dramas of Shakespeare are excellent tools to help in developing the Four Basic Skills (LSRW) of communication. Teaching Shakespeare’s drama with a special focus on language development can help meet the students’ need in communication. Literature is recognized as the most authentic of language use.

Shakespeare is not an antiquated art form. His plays are full of explosive family situations, complex relationships, and deep emotions that today’s students can—and do. Shakespeare is for everyone and that students of all ability levels can successfully engage with his works. The best way to learn Shakespeare is to do Shakespeare. What does this mean? Put simply, it is getting students up on their feet and physically, intellectually, and

vocally engaging with the text. We believe that students learn best using a performance-based methodology and that performance can build a personal connection with the text that traditional teaching methods may not. Performance—which is not the same thing as “acting”—activates the imagination. Active learning invigorates the mind and stays with the learner. Shakespeare’s genius with language, his skill as a dramatist, and his insight into the human nature and condition can instill even the least academic student with a passion not only for Shakespeare but also for language, drama, psychology, and knowledge. Dramas are not meant to be read silently on. Students must be assigned roles and a batch of students may read their respective roles. Dramas have the magic of making the readers shed their self-inhibitive individuality. Dramas are helpful in contributing to the efficiency of learners’ listening comprehension. It involves sound perception and recognition of the sound of words, their accent and their tonal variation. This technique of teaching drama will enable the students’ to recognize stress and intonation patterns. The Lesson Plans and tips for teaching Shakespeare included in this curriculum provide practical, classroom-tested approaches for using performance based teaching techniques. Famous lines and phrases from the play and interesting facts to share with students. Enthusiasm is more important than expertise.

A Ghost appears at Elsinore castle. Prince Hamlet goes to the castle ramparts to watch for the apparition. When the Ghost reappears, it speaks to Hamlet and claims to be his dead father. The Ghost asks Hamlet to avenge his murder. Hamlet, horrified, vows to “remember.” uncertain of whom he can trust, Hamlet feigns madness. His mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius, who is now king of Denmark and Hamlet’s stepfather, sends two of Hamlet’s friends to spy on him and to discover the cause of his apparent madness. Hamlet arranges for a play about the murder of a king to be performed, hoping that it will reveal Claudius’ guilt. Convinced that Claudius is guilty, Hamlet finds him alone but is unable to go through with killing him. Claudius sends Hamlet to England, where he has given orders for Hamlet to be killed, but Hamlet escapes. Hamlet returns to Denmark to

complete his vengeance, and succeeds in killing Claudius before he is killed.

As teachers, we often have the tendency to answer these questions for our students by explaining and interpreting the text. We tell them what the play “is supposed to mean.” By finding ways for students to make personal connections with Hamlet, we stop being translators, and students take over the role of teacher themselves. The single most efficient tool for unlocking Shakespeare’s language is performance. When students read out or enact drama it helps in developing their speaking skill. Fluency is the most important characteristic of effective speech. This quality can be achieved if students are given opportunity to enact stage-plays in the class room. Students need not read every word of a play. The one element you cannot eliminate is performance. Performance is not putting on a fully rehearsed scene with costumes for an audience instead; think of performance as vertical text analysis. Students are actively engaging with the text: physically, intellectually, and vocally. Be willing to take a risk. As a teacher, you will no longer be in charge of what your students learn. You will find them arguing about words and lines, discussing interpretations of how to enact a scene. In short, they will have become active learners, not just people sitting at desks. Francis Bacon said “Reading Maketh a full man” and his statement is still relevant. Reading and enacting drama in the class room is a great help for students to learn language. In the students’ efforts to read and enact a play by assuming roles to enact, their reading speed improves without their being too conscious of it. The activity of play reading and enacting helps students to develop their reading skill. To quote Brumfit again, “Literary texts provide examples of language resources being used to the full and the reader is placed in an active interactional role in working with and making sense of this language. Thus, literature lessons make for genuine opportunities in group work and /or open-ended exploration by the individual student. Performing Shakespeare—even at the most rudimentary level, script in hand, stumbling over the difficult words—can and usually does permanently change a students’ relationship with the plays and their author. Shakespeare is for everyone. Students of all ability levels, all backgrounds, and at all grade levels can—and do—successfully engage with Shakespeare’s works. The plays are full of explosive family situations and complex relationships that adolescents recognize. Performance is particularly crucial in teaching Shakespeare, whose naked language on the page may be difficult to understand. “Performance” in this sense does not mean presenting memorized, costumed, fully staged shows, although those can be both satisfying and educational. Performance means getting students up on their feet, moving around a classroom as characters, and speaking the lines themselves.

Integrating language through literature

Integrating language through literature, dramas of Shakespeare proves an effective medium in developing all the four communication skills Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. As Brumfit observes “A natural concomitant of literariness in language would be an approach to the teaching of literature in which language study and literary study are closely integrated and harmonized them.” On the positive side, literature provides a rich context which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. A literary text like Shakespeare dramas can serve as an excellent prompt for oral

work. In all the ways, a student working with literature is helped with basic skills of language learning. A performance-based methodology and that performance can build a personal connection with the text that traditional teaching methods may not. Performance—which is not the same thing as “acting”—activates the imagination. Active learning invigorates the mind and stays with the learner.

Shakespeare’s genius with language, his skill as a dramatist, and his insight into the human nature and condition can instill even the least academic student with a passion not only for Shakespeare but also for language, drama, psychology, and knowledge. The lesson plans and tips for teaching Shakespeare included in this curriculum. It provides practical, classroom-tested approaches for using performance based teaching techniques. We can have also included a synopsis, and famous lines and phrases from the play and interesting facts to share with students. The teaching Shakespeare, whose naked language on the page may be difficult to understand. “Performance” in this sense does not mean presenting memorized, costumed, fully staged shows, although those can be both satisfying and educational.* Trust Shakespeare’s original language, but do not labour over every word. *Pick out key scenes that speak most clearly to your students. We do not have to start with Act 1, Scene 1.* Use the text to explain the life and times, not vice versa. The following two lesson plans will give you practical ways to get started using this approach in your classroom. Shakespeare play is a comprehensive resource for teaching Shakespeare, with lesson plans, activity guides, videos, and other teaching tools. Performing Shakespeare—even at the most rudimentary level, script in hand, stumbling over the difficult words—can and usually does permanently change a students’ relationship with the plays and their author.

How to teach Shakespeare

In the words of Brumfit, “Reading is the most autonomous and individualizable ability in language work and literature is rich and widely –appealing source of material for reading. There must be a content which is in itself worthwhile if advanced language teaching is to be really effective”. How long does it take to teach a play? A Shakespeare unit can take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, depending on your students. We may want to spend a few days to introduce the play’s major characters and themes, or we could spend a couple of weeks exploring several scenes, key ideas, and multiple interpretations. Full play units, such as the ones in Shakespeare set free, can take up to six weeks to teach. We do not need to start with Act 1, Scene 1 and we do not need to labour over every word. Do we need to teach the entire play? Sometimes it is better to do just part of a play rather than the whole play. Or we might opt for a Shakespeare sampler, using several scenes from different plays. Which edition of the play is best to use with students? It is inexpensive, and easy to use, with the text on one page and footnotes and scene summaries on the facing page. Be aware that Shakespeare plays in literature anthologies often edit out some of the more bawdy content—content which students often love. They are also very heavy to carry around when students are performing scenes. Should we start with the movie? One disadvantage with watching a film version first is that students equate this version with the play and have difficulty realizing that scenes. The famous lines can be interpreted and enacted in many different ways. One way

around this is to start with one scene which your students read and perform. Follow this activity by showing clips from several film versions of the same scene. This strategy enables allow for some meaningful discussion about possible interpretations. What if we have never read the play before? Learn along with your students—model for them the enthusiasm and excitement that comes with authentic learning. Do we need to teach about the Globe Theatre or Shakespeare’s Life? The simple answer is “No.” While telling students that Shakespeare had three children and that he and Anne Hathaway had to get married might be interesting, it really does not help them understand the plays. It is much better to integrate some facts about Elizabethan life when they come up in the plays. So when Francis Flute protests, “Let me not play a woman. I have a beard coming” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that is the perfect opportunity to explain the Elizabethan stage convention of young men playing the female parts. The sanitary conditions have nothing to do with a student’s appreciation of Shakespeare’s language. If we want to give students a project, have them select, rehearse, and perform a scene. What is a “trigger scene?” A trigger scene is a short scene from a play that introduces the students to key characters and plot elements. Most important, the trigger scene shows students that they can uncover the meaning of Shakespeare’s texts as they “put the scene on its feet.”

Lesson Plan

This lesson plan covers, why students will confront the central problem of this play; Hamlet’s tragic flaw indecisiveness, procrastination and delaying to take revenge on Claudius. Focusing on Hamlet’s reactions to the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother, students will study the text and grasp its subtleties by assuming the roles of directors and actors. Students will perform the scene for the class in groups and discuss the editorial and directorial choices each group made. The students will then watch a film clip of this scene and discuss the choices that the director and actors in the film made. Finally, they will write about this series of activities in a journal entry. The goal of this lesson is for students to explore the dynamics that exist between the literary characters, and how those dynamics create dramatic tension. Hamlet’s soliloquy can be introduced. “To be or not to be” is the famous opening phrase of a Soliloquy in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*. He questions the meaning of life, and whether or not it is worthwhile to stay alive when life contains so many hardships. He comes to the conclusion that the main reason people stay alive is due to a fear of death and uncertainty at what lies beyond life. This lesson plan will take two days. Students will have read the scene before coming to class. Begin with a quick clarification session on what, if anything, students did not get in the reading. Give students photocopies of the scene. Divide students into groups of 5 or 6 students each. Instruct the groups to assign parts and read through the scene together. Encourage students to add notes in the margins, making collective decisions as to when characters should enter and exit, where they should stand, what emotions they should convey, etc. Students should feel free to cut long sections of text, as long as the essence of the scene remains. As a guideline, students should be working with an edited script that takes 5–6 minutes to perform. After 15 minutes, students should be on their feet, scripts in hand, working through the scene and their new stage directions. Remind students that this scene will be performed the next day.

To guide students while they are working, distribute a list of important reminders

When students enter class the second day, have them get in their groups and do a five minute run-through of their scene. Remind students to follow the guidelines on their handout. Students should arrange their seats so that the classroom has an open area to act in. Encourage students to watch the other groups closely, noting the decisions each group made. The audience should consider: body language, tone of voice, position of characters in relation to each other, and the overall mood of the scene.

After the last group finishes, ask students to respond to the performances. Ask students to highlight the similarities and differences between the scenes. Particularly, how did each group choose to portray Hamlet as he responded to his mother? Was he insolent, despairing, or angry? How did Claudius act? What did each group cut from the scene? What did each group leave in? Let the discussion run its course, but leave at least 10 minutes at the end to view the scene on film. They will get the model acting and they imitate in their action. Show the class one director’s idea of how to do this scene. Tell students that they will be responding to this section of the film in a writing assignment for homework: a journal entry that discusses the directorial decisions of the films, and the effectiveness of the actors’ portrayals. Students can see the film versions such as *Hamlet* film (Almeryda, 2000; Branagh, 1996; or Zeffirelli, 1991) in order to imitate the right action.

Conclusion

The benefits of language through literature approach, though, are equally evident in the teaching and learning process outcome. Above all, literature can be helpful in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters. Helping students explore their own responses to literature. Shakespeare’s play is as source material for language teaching and learning. To conclude in the words of Brumfit: “Literature provides instances of language structures in use, which can form the basis for instruction and practice in the language skills, accompanied by a varying amount of grammatical analysis and explanation”. In devising activities for integrating language and literature we have born in mind the notion that, learning is promoted by involving as many of the students possible. Studying Shakespeare’s plays through the use of literary material have exciting possibilities for students and implications that well beyond the class room. We have found that role play, improvisation, creative writing, discussions, questionnaires, visuals and many other activities which we use successfully to vary our language classes can serve a similar purpose when we teach literature. An array of student centred activities is particularly important when working with students who are not literature specialists and who may not as yet have developed a wish to read literature in the target language on their own initiative.

References

1. Shakespeare William. (Ed), *Hamlet*, Edited by Verity AW, New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2009.
2. Bradley AC. (Ed), *Shakespearean Tragedy*, New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2010.
3. Moulton G. Richard. (Ed), *Shakespeare As a Dramatic Artist*, New Delhi: Surjeet, 1990.

4. Brumfit CJ, Carter RA. (Ed), *Literature and Language Teaching*, Oxford: ELBS with Oxford University Press, 1991.
5. Brumfit CJ, Johnson. (Ed), *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
6. Johnson K, Morrow K. (Ed), *Functional Materials and The Classroom Teacher*, Reading: Centre for Applied Language Studies, 1978.
7. Littlewood WT. *Literary and Informational Texts in Language Teaching*, Praxis, 1976, 1.
8. Collie Joanne and Slater Stephen. (Ed) *Literature in the Language Classroom* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.