

The Role of Literature in Achieving English Proficiency: EFL College Students' Language Use

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Abstract

It has been observed that many users of English in Iraq do not possess the desired level of competence in their use of English language, with its attendant high functional load. This paper seeks to discover the role of literature in using English language proficiently so it explores English literature as an authentic source for achieving the desired proficiency among Iraqi users of English as a foreign language. To this end, final year students of the Department of English Language at Mazaya University College in Dhi Qar, Iraq were selected for this study. Questionnaires and participant observation were employed as data collection instruments. It was discovered that students who have more exposure to literary works are more proficient in using English language. It is, therefore, concluded that motivating students to read literary works, listen, dramatize, and recite them will acquaint them with the competence they need to use language efficiently and confidently.

Key words:English Language, Iraq, proficiency, literary works, functional load

Introduction

English enjoys a very prominent status as the most widely spoken language in the world. Lane estimates that native speakers of English in the Americas and Europe are about "360 million people" (n.p.). He also observes that about half a billion people living in the former British colonies in Africa, Asia, and Northern Europe speak English as a second language (n.p.). In many other parts of the world, it is used as an official or foreign language or acquired for instrumental or integrative purposes. According to Veghese, "it is the most international of languages" (3), and Hornby observes that "one in five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence (R 91). English is the language of international diplomacy, political propaganda, trade, international sports commentaries, music and entertainment industries, communication, science, technology, and a lot more. It remains a window through which Iraq interact with the international community to keep up with the modern world demands and its technological advancements. As a foreign language in Iraq, English serves both as a school subject and a medium of instruction. (Atanda and Jaiyeoba 2011, 93). Therefore, it is necessary to have a standard proficiency level for a successful educational carrier in Iraq.

While English language has a high national and international functional load, thus requiring a standard level of proficiency, many educated Iraqis make grammatical and lexical errors. This study argues that if Iraqi learners of English study English literature, they will be exposed to authentic language use in the context (i.e., language in the literary pieces to which they are exposed) and thus, naturally pick up some parts of it.

Nwachukwu-Agbada (2003), Umeasiegbu (2003), and Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2011) have written on the importance of Literature in learning a language as chapter contributions in *Use of English textbooks*. However, as far as the author of this paper knows, investigations into the role of English literature in learning English using a survey research design has received little attention. Hence, this paper will address the following research questions:

- i. Are EFL Learners exposed to English literature?
- ii. What motivates EFL learners to study English literature?
- iii. What are the benefits of studying English literature for achieving proficiency in English?

Humans use language in different contexts, and the context in which it is used determines the type of language used. In other words, a language that is appropriate in one context may be inappropriate in another. Literature is one of such areas in which language is used uniquely to communicate meaning. By literature, we mean “works of art in the form of ‘high art’ composed in prose or verse form” (Simpson, 2004, p. 2). That is literature produced “from the imaginative power of man” (Ezeaku, 2014, p. 1). A good number of imaginative literary works still exist in the form of undocumented folk tales, proverbs, folk songs and dances, myths, and legends in less literate societies in the world.

In fact, there is no literature without language. Literature uses a more patterned, figurative and ornate type of language. Literary figures go for elegance in their choice of language. To achieve this, they use all the stylistic embellishments they can avail themselves to foreground their language and achieve the desired effect.

Linguists usually differentiate between language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is the subconscious process through which infants acquire their native or first language. It involves immersion. The infant simply picks the language up by staying around family members, who speak that language. Language learning involves the learner making conscious efforts to understand and use a language, and the teacher providing instructions on the how to do so. Language learning occurs after people have acquired their native language and want to develop competence in another language for instrumental or integrative purposes. To facilitate language teaching and learning, teachers usually apply different language learning theories and employ a variety of teaching methodologies put forward by linguists, sociolinguists, psychologists and educationists. The three learning theories that have been influential in second language learning situations for many decades are behavioral, cognitive, and sociocultural theories.

Behaviorism focuses on the formation of second language (L2) habits; cognitive focuses on a single hypothetical learners internal information processing and transmission of L2 input and output; sociocultural theory attempts to capture the context, action, and motives of second language events between individuals who are simultaneously social and cognitive (Xiangui, 2005, p. 120).

Behaviorism explains language learning in terms of verbal behavior, in which an activity that is practiced and reinforced until it becomes a habit. A learner who forms the habit of reading literary works soon discovers their innumerable contributions to learning vocabulary and grammar of the target language. This naturally motivates him or her to read them more. To cognitive theorists, language learning involves “gradual automatization of skills through stages of restructuring and linking information to old ones” (Xiangui, 2005, p.122). A learner who understands the importance of literature in the acquisition of a target language and reads it as often as he/she should have unlimited access to the language because he/she finds himself or herself in the world created by the artist in which the actors or characters live and interact with one another. It gives the learner this opportunity to gradually pick up the underlying grammar by linking new pieces of knowledge to the already existing ones. The sociocultural theory regards learners as social beings and active participants in the learning process. This theory sees language learning as a means of equipping students with the skills and competence needed to use the target language both in and outside the classroom setting. The learner, by learning a new language, joins a new culture (Xizngui 2005). Literature exposes the learner to the target culture, making him or her an insider in the community created in the text.

This brings us to the discussion of literary genres which include poetry as the oldest form of literature and the first to gain the attention of scholars, probably because it existed in its oral form in most societies even before the invention of writing. Many poets have defined poetry in diverse ways. Wordsworth defined it as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility” (William Wordsworth *Lyrical Ballads*, n.p.). Egudu (1979, p. 4) sees poetry as “the method of literary expressions which suggests by means of imagery, rhythm, and sound”. Poems are better enjoyed when recited because the sound effects are perceived and appreciated more. In the words of Applebee, Bermúdez, Blau, Caplan, Elbow, Hynds, Langer, and Marshall, “in poetry, ideas, and emotions are tightly compressed into a package where everything—the meanings and sounds of words, the lines breaks, even the empty spaces - is designed to create an effect or to convey a message or an experience” (2000, p. 93).

Poems make extensive use of imageries and figures of speech. Poets use imageries to produce pictures in the minds of the audience by tapping into the five senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Figures of speech refer to ways of using language to convey a meaning beyond the literal meaning of words. They violate graphological, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic rules of the language in order to convey their message. The manipulation of language to achieve special poetic effects is uncommon in day-to-day use of languages, and this displays unique mastery of language on the part of artists and constitutes poetic license. Consider this excerpt our

Had we but world enough, and time,

This coyness, Lady, were no crime.

We would sit down and think which way

To walk, and pass our long Love's Day.

(Marvel, 2017, n.p)

The language of poetry, therefore, is not marked by the rigidity of rules. Language form changes as the context in which language is used changes. Mastery of poetic devices adds to the competence of the learner and boosts his/her confidence in the use of language. Recitation of poems sharpens the intellect and makes the memory to be at alert.

Prose is another genre. It has two major subgenres named fiction and nonfiction. Fiction is based on invented/ imaginary stories with fictitious characters, events, and settings. It includes novels, drama, poetry, legends, myths, horror, fantasy, fairy tales, short stories, historical fiction, science fiction, and others that involve made-up stories. Fiction was derived from the Latin word 'fictio' which means 'a shaping', 'a counterfeiting' (Kenedy and Gioia, 2005, p. 3). Works of fiction may be inspired by real persons and events, but they usually spring from the writer's imagination. So, they tell imaginary stories concocted from life experiences and events. The most typical forms of prose which students are exposed to are novels and short stories.

Experienced writers deploy sentence, phrasal and clausal variations; different grammatical rules, foregrounding of different types, and so on in their works, thus bringing students in direct contact with elements of language which they could have been struggling to master in formal English language classes.

Another one is drama. Here, the audience is not only exposed to correct usages, but also learns to compliment speech with the right actions and vary its tunes when speaking to communicate the desired message. Dramatic monologues train the learner in the act of rhetoric which helps to develop their speaking skill. The audience often imitates the speeches of their favorite actors. Apart from presenting real-life use of language, drama employs dialogue to a large extent. As the audience watches the actors taking turns addressing each other, they are groomed in the use of language in conversation, which forms the bulk of our day-to-day use of language. Plays dramatize different aspects of humans' lived experiences as they live in their society. In other words, real-life situations are imitated to reveal the things that are tenable in society

Language is a viable tool used to recreate human experiences in drama. It is used to piece together all the elements of drama to produce a comprehensive work. So, the audience watches the actors using well-constructed expressions in English language, and thus, pick language items.

Materials and Methods

Survey research design was adopted in the present study. The researcher observed students of the Department of English Language and Literature at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka, Nigeria, and distributed questionnaires to ninety final year students selected through purposive sampling. Only eighty-two copies were retrieved and analyzed. Final year students were chosen because they had passed all their courses, depending on whether they majored in language studies or literature. The analysis was done so that the data collected provide answers to the research questions raised in previous sections.

Results and Discussion

Research Question I

Are EFL Learners exposed to literature in English?

Question 1

Do you read literary works?	yes	82	100%	Nil	0
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Table 1

All the respondents indicated that they are exposed to literary works. They are all students of English and Literary studies, so literature is a crucial part of their curriculum.

Question 2

Which of the literary genres do you like most?	Drama	9	10.9%	Poetry	70	85.4%	Prose	3	3.7%
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Table 2

Nine respondents who make up 10.9% of the sample indicated that they have a preference for drama. 70 representing 85.4% liked poetry, while 3 representing 3.7% preferred prose.

Question 3

Which of them do you read often?	Drama	5	6.1%	Poetry	75	91.5%	Prose	2	2.4%
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Table 3

6.1% of the participants (i.e., five individuals) responded that they read drama most often. 91.5% of the participants, which stands for 75 respondents, indicated that they read poetry more often, while 2.4%, which represent two respondents, stated that they read prose more often.

Question 4

How often do you read literary works?	Very often	5	62.2%	Once a week	12	14.6%	Once a month	13	15.9%	Not Often	6	7.3%
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Table 4

Fifty-one respondents representing 62.2% of the participants indicated that they read literary works often. 12 individuals representing 4.6% showed that they read them once a week, 13 respondents representing 5.9 % indicated they read them once a month, while 6 individuals representing 7.3 % indicated that they do not read them very often.

Question 5

About how many literary works have you read in the past- month?	One	8	9.8 %	Two	15	18.2 %	More than two	59	72%
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Table 5

Eight respondents representing 9.8 said they had read one literary piece in the previous month, 15 respondents standing for 18.2 % indicated that they read two literary pieces, while 59 individuals representing 72% said they read more than two.

It is evident from the previous part that the students are exposed to literary works.

Research Question II

What motivates ESL learners to study literature in English?

Question 6: Who is your favorite Artist?

Forty-four respondents comprising 53.7% of the participants indicated that Chinua Achebe is their favorite artist; 17 comprising 20.7% showed that Chimamanda Adichie is their favorite artist; 4 comprising 4.9 % mentioned Dan Brown; 2 comprising 2.4% indicated that Henry Ibsen and Shakespeare are their top artists. The remaining 15.9% indicated that Kendrick Lamar, James Patterson, Virginia Woolf, Abubakar Ibrahim, Mario Puzzo, Ifeoma Okoye, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Danielle Steel, Emeka Nwbueze, Samuel Becket, Hardly Chase, and Nora Roberts are their best artists.

Question 7: Why is the artist your favorite author?

Reasons bordering on the themes, plot, unique style, and artistic choice of language, as well as careful choice of words were prevalent in participants` responses.

Question 8: What motivates you to read literary works?

Enlightenment, entertainment, exposure to reality, desire to learn how the artist resolves crises were some of the motivating factors noted by the students. Others included the desire to improve and increase their vocabulary, to be more proficient in the use of English, love for reading, and the urge to write like the artists.

Questions 9 and 10:

S/N	Questions	Responses and Percentages					
9	Are literary works part of your course of study?	Yes	69	84.2%	No	13	15.8%
10	Are all the literary works you read recommended by your lecturers?	Yes	15	18.3%	No	67	81.7%

Table 6

In response to question 9, 69 respondents representing 84.2 % noted that literary works are part of their course of study, while 13 individuals representing 3.8% said the opposite. In response to question 10, 15 respondents representing 8.3% of the sample indicated that they read only the literary works recommended by their professors, while 67 respondents representing 81.7 % indicated that they read other works of arts as well.

The analysis of this research question shows that factors such as the artists and how they handled their works, the desire to acquire vocabulary or proficiency in English, and exposure can motivate students to study literature.

Research Question III

Of what benefits is Literature in English to achieving proficiency in the English Language?

Questions 11, 12 and 13

S/N	Questions	Responses and Percentages					
11	Do you think the literary works you read have impacts on your use of English language?	Yes	80	97%	No	2	3%
12	Do you think literature contributes to the learning of— English language?	Yes	78	95.6%	No	4	4.9%
13	Do you think paying more attention to literature can make you a better user of English language?	Yes	78	95.6%	No	4	4.9%

Table 7

In response to question 11, 80 of the respondents representing 97 % of the sample affirmed that the literary works they read have impacts on their acquisition and use of English language, while 2 of them representing 3 % of the respondents said literary works do not have impacts on their use of English language. In response to question 12, 78 respondents representing 95.6 % of the participants believed that literature contributes to the learning of English language. In contrast, 4 of them comprising 4.9% of the sample insisted that literature does not contribute to the learning of English Language. Regarding question 13, 78 respondents representing 95.6 % of the participants were of the view that paying more attention to literature can make them better users of English language, while 4 of them representing 4.9 % maintained that paying more attention to literature cannot make them

better users of English language. The analysis of this research question affirms that literature helps in achieving proficiency in using English language.

The above analysis showed that all the respondents were exposed to the three major genres of literature as part of their course of study. Of the three genres, the majority of the students showed a preference for poetry, and they were mostly exposed to this genre. Fiction was the least preferred, and the least read. The study did not investigate the reasons for their choice of poetry, whose language is more compact, and at times more difficult to understand.

On who their favorite artists are, more than half of them indicated that it was Chinua Achebe. Others chose Chimamanda Adichie, Ibsen Brown, and many others as their favorite artists. What attracted them to the artists include their handling of the theme and plots of their works with finesse, as well as their careful choice of language.

The analysis also revealed that the students are motivated to read literary works for entertainment and enlightenment purposes, and to become proficient users of English language and good literary artists.

A good number of students believe that literary works are useful in the acquisition of English language, and the more they pay attention to them, the more proficient they become in using English language.

Conclusion

Literature plays an important role in learning English. Novels written by proficient users of English expose language learners to standard expressions in English, and thereby bequeathing them unconsciously with the rules of language. Drama exposes them to the use of language in real-life situations. Through it, learners learn to engage in sustained interactions. Recitation of poems makes the memory alert and equips the learner with the knowledge of expressing themselves with finesse as it deploys figurative and ornate language. Literature, generally, helps improve listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of language learners, so the more language learners are exposed to literary works written in the target language, the more they become proficient in the use of language. Therefore, more exposure to English literature is recommended for Nigerian learners of English to help them achieve the desired proficiency in the language.

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