

The study of literature as a resource for second language acquisition

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Abstract

This paper emanates from an earlier study, which examined the views of Namibian Grade 11 and 12 teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) on the use of English literature in ESL classrooms. The aim of the paper is to present the rationale and conceptualisation underlying the significance of the use of literature to improve general language proficiency levels of students. The study is based on the Learner Centred approach which is related to the communicative theory to learning and teaching. The implication of the paper is that literature should be taught conscientiously by language educators to enhance learner proficiency in language classrooms. The benefits of literature in an ESL classroom are multidimensional; which include, among others; attainment of pragmatic (social language use) skills, grammar and vocabulary expansion, extensive reading motivation, intercultural awareness, language skills and critical thinking skills. This was also supported by the findings of the study in which a significant number of the respondents agreed that the study of literature had an important role to play in language acquisition.¹

Key Words: Literature, Language, Communicative, Learner-centred

¹Of the respondents in that earlier study, 35.71% strongly agreed that the study of literature that the Grade 11 and 12 learners in Namibia were exposed to had an influence on their academic writing skills. This was followed by 32.14% of the respondents who indicated that they agreed with the statement. Nevertheless, 32.14% decided to be neutral on this statement, although their explanations to this question indicated that in one way or another they agreed that the study of literature has some impact on learners' academic writing.

Orientation of the study

In spite of the fact that the Ministry of Education in Namibia is persistently revising school curricular and policies with the intention of equipping learners with necessary skills that would enable them to effectively and efficiently participate in a knowledge-based economy; several setbacks seem to hamper the achievement of this goal. Recently there has been a national outcry on the competency of Namibian teachers in teaching English. This therefore, calls for the interrogation of several aspects that pertain to the delivery of subject matter in Namibian schools, in this case, the teaching of ESL. Teachers need to be trained to be proficient in both written and spoken English lest Namibian learners graduate from high school with language deficiencies.

According to Diescho (2015), though English is the only official language in Namibia, only 4% of the population has English as the 1st language. Diescho further argues that:

English is part of our problem and solution at the same time. In other words, the absence of English from a national language conversation does not and cannot help in the advancement towards the strategic goals of Vision 2030, one of which is, improved literacy through education. An omission of a serious effort to take English to the people of Namibia as a means of liberation and progress would be a gross oversight, if we are to think and act in the vital interests of the nation in the short, medium and long terms of strategic development planning.

Since independence in 1990 the English language has been the medium of instruction in Namibia's public classrooms, but the majority of teachers whose call is to teach the English language seem to be failing in English competency tests, suggesting an urgent need for change especially in the training of those teachers whose responsibility is to teach ESL. "The Namibian government's commitment to the English language as the main language of education has been undermined by revelations that 98% of the southern African country's teachers are not sufficiently proficient in the language" (Kisting, 2012). This was illustrated by disclosed results of government English proficiency tests carried out in 2011 that revealed that all but 2% of teachers needed to undertake supplementary in-service-training in the English language. Hence the purpose of this study was to examine the views of ESL teachers regarding the significance of the study of literature on learners' academic writing.

Significance of literature in a Second Language (L2) classroom

There has been much controversies and consensus on the use of the study of literature in L2 classrooms. This paper however only focuses on its advantages. It is believed that effective and focused reading of literature texts stimulates and underpins proficiency in aspects that include grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and writing. Reading literature texts can put into practice grammatical structures, new lexical items and elements of pronunciation. Reading can also offer good writing models. NIED (2009, p. 2) stipulates that since English is the country's official language, it is of great importance in the lives of Namibians. As a cross curricular subject, in schools, English should be accorded the necessary attention. Therefore it is the duty of educators, especially teachers of English to ensure that learners attain the necessary skills that would enable them to communicate in English in any context.

According to Hamdoun and Hussain (n.d.), learners in schools need to be taught English in such a way that they will understand scientific and technical vocabulary for specific purposes. The two authors claim that the standard of English in general across the world has declined due to teaching methods employed in different schools. Therefore, teachers who are the custodians of knowledge impartment should develop learners' abilities to use the language for a variety of communicative purposes. Moreover, the study of literature plays a significant role in developing language learning abilities by training learners to infer meaning through different language clues. This in turn, they contend, enforces stimulating and enjoyable linguistic communication. "Literary discourse offers perspectives, which inspires learners to this realisation and use language in a sensible and effective way. There is a difference between teaching about the language and communicating in the language. One great problem is that many teachers believe that teaching about the language in itself will make the learners capable of using the language for communication. In fact, there is often 'a great ability gap' between having information and being able to use it spontaneously for communicative purposes. Namibian learners should be armed with effective language skills that would enable them to survive in the global realm; as aptly stated by Hussain and Hamdoun (n.d.).

The rationale of the Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) ESL syllabus Ordinary level provides evidence as to how the Government of the Republic of Namibia has placed paramount importance on the English language, thus the need to interrogate issues that relate to its effective use and usage. "Use" here implies to *how* the language is used and how it functions in communication. This can be contrasted with "usage", which is the grammatical explanation of some language aspects. The research results of this project provided a consensus for the mandatory use of the study of literature in Grade 11 and 12 Namibian ESL

classrooms. However appropriate methods and approaches should be employed in order to get the most out of the literature texts used in senior secondary schools. It is, thus, the role and responsibility of all stakeholders that include material developers, syllabus designers, trainers of teachers and the teachers themselves to determine the study materials to be used and how to use them in order for the learners to effectively benefit from these materials. Learners' activities and assignments should be tailor-made in such a way that the learners ultimately become proficient in both written and spoken English. This would in due course enhance learning and teaching experiences by analysing the distinctive characteristics of the classrooms and education system in which they would be used.

According to Smit (2007, p. 51), when learners study academic texts they should be analytical and critical. Therefore, literature texts should be used to enhance such analytical and critical skills. When students study literature texts they should be aware that a text can be acquiescent as long as the author wishes; that there is never only one way it could have been written and that it should be convincing to readers. Discussing literature, particularly the "point of view" aspect, can help foster academic skills in a way that minimises cognitive threats and encourages taking risks. Oster (1989) further states that literature engages the emotions and encourages personal identification. It does so, however, in the self-contained world it has created – and it remains a safe environment for self-examination as it remains fiction.

Corresponding with the above assertions, NIED (2009, p. 2) argues that "language stimulates personal growth and assists in the development of general knowledge, attitudes, critical abilities, moral values, and the aesthetic sense." In Namibian schools this can be nurtured by multitudes of literature material that is written in the English language. The above argument is accentuated by the available literature which underscores the importance of the study of literature as it has a number of advantages when used appropriately in an ESL classroom. This paper also advocates for a mandatory component of literature from primary to secondary school. The logic for introducing all ESL learners to the study of literature is that studying literature contributes to the learners' intellectual development. It also increases the level of interest in linguistic acquisition thus in turn enhancing their degree of linguistic competence. In a nutshell, the constant exposure to reading texts would provide Namibian learners with the necessary awareness skills about language in different contexts.

Below is a list of some of the advantages of the study of literature in ESL classrooms;

1. Vocabulary expansion

Maley (1989, as cited in Bobkina and Dominguez, 2014) states that “literature deals with a potpourri of language types and varieties—from slang to formal—and various subject matters.” The above statement implies that when learners read different texts that are written in the English language they, in turn, acquire the meanings of different words they come across as they read. This acquisition can be done either individually or through class discussions. The ESL teachers should encourage their learners to tease out the meanings of different words in the contexts they are used. Consequently, this would create awareness that words in the English language contain more than one meaning. Therefore, as the learners are constantly exposed to different words they would be able to use these words effectively in their own language interactions.

According to Cowie (2005), vocabulary are all the words that a person knows and uses. For that reason, for the purpose of this study vocabulary may be defined as the knowledge of words and word meanings in a specific context. Studies point out that knowledge of vocabulary is highly linked with reading comprehension. This is because in order to grasp the meaning of any text, learners need to know already a wide range of words. They also need to develop techniques to understand the meaning of words from their contexts, and later add them to their vocabulary. These techniques could be obtained through the study of different literature texts.

In agreement with the above assertions, Shoebottom (2012) explains that educational researchers have found a strong correlation between reading and vocabulary knowledge. In other words, students who have a large vocabulary are usually good readers. This is not very surprising, since the best way to acquire a large vocabulary is to read extensively, and if one reads extensively one is likely to be or become a good reader, hence an effective academic writer. According to Katib, Rezaei and Derakhshan (2011, p. 203), vocabulary knowledge can be expanded through considerable exposure to literary texts which treat both formal and informal language. Reading these literary texts is a good exercise for enlarging the learners’ vocabulary since many of these texts are replete with so many new words which can be beneficial to learners of ESL. In so doing Namibian Grade 11 and 12 ESL learners would acquire vocabulary that may enhance their academic discourse experience.

2. Developing Writing Skills

Critical thinkers tend to be critical readers and eventually critical writers. Studying literature texts could serve as a foundation for critical thinking and writing among ESL learners. Teachers of ESL should approach the reading materials in such a way that they encourage their learners to reflect on their own lives, learning and language experiences. This would allow learners to question, interpret, connect and explore ideas as many literature texts are prolific with ideas to look at. Namibian ESL teachers should be aware of the fact that they have a greater responsibility of ensuring that their learners develop Higher-order thinking skills (HOTs). According to Katib *et al.* (2011, p203), in today's global world, critical thinking is the cornerstone of education especially at advanced levels of education because such thinking prepares learners not to take things for granted and attempt to unravel the hidden meanings of texts. Critical thinking informs critical discourse analysis in ESL learning. Assessment in most subjects is done through writing literature studies and could enhance the writing of the learners as they are exposed to different words and forms of writing.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2006), "to be literate is to read and write in many different ways." Subsequently, effective writing skills are imperative in most if not all academic subjects in Namibian schools and tertiary institutions. It is through writing that learners are graded at the end of each class. Good academic writing skills are the realisation of all the grammar and vocabulary concepts previously learned into a piece of text. ESL learners should be motivated to develop outstanding writing skills because writing is one of the most important parts of examinations in Namibian schools.

Furthermore, Shoebottom (2012) states that Educational researchers have found that there is a strong correlation between reading and academic success. In other words, a learner who is a good reader is more likely to do well in school and pass examinations than a learner who is a weak reader. This implies that good readers can understand the individual sentences and the organisational structure of a piece of writing. They can comprehend ideas, follow arguments and detect implications. As they go through the study of literature, they should be encouraged to determine the meaning of many of the unfamiliar words from the context in which they are used. In brief, good readers can extract from the writing what is important for their writing tasks.

Katib *et al* (2011, p. 203) further agrees with the above assertions by stating that the study of literature can be set as good ground for writing practice. This can be done by assigning learners tasks that require them to write about a theme they have learned from their readings or they can be asked to complete a poem or short story. They can also write the end of a story in their own words or narrate a story from the point of view of another character in a short story, novella or

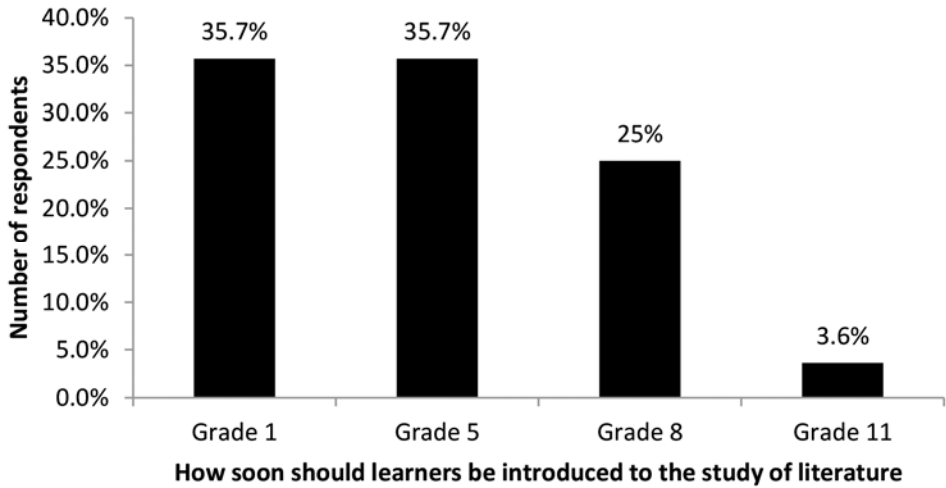
novel. This will not only encourage them to be creative writers but will also help them to use language effectively.

3. *Gaining Fluency*

Cowie (2005) maintains that fluency is the quality of being able to speak or write a language, especially a foreign language, easily and well. This ability to speak, read and write smoothly and easily can be acquired through the study of literature. ESL teachers should recognise that cultivating English fluency in their learners is one of their principal responsibilities as their learners grapple to be fluent in this language that is accorded the status of the official language in Namibia.

There are several motivations in support of the study of literature in an ESL classroom. Hamdoun and Hussain (n.d.) argue that literature provides subject matter that has the power to motivate learners and help them in exploring the possibilities of usages and meaning that enhances their language competence in a significant manner. Since material that is authentic should be selected for the learners, these literary texts should be used to explore the resources of language to its maximum capacity. The wide range of language structure that is offered by the study of literature should be used in such a way that it enhances the learners' understanding of the range of language usage. This understanding could be seen to have a direct impact on the learners' ability to learn and use language not for mechanical responses but for the expression and responses of those thoughts and ideas which would be stifled in the brain in the absence of rich language resources. Therefore, regarded in this context, the study of literature could become a means towards language learning and proficiency.

From the earlier study, it is strongly suggested that Namibian learners should be introduced to literature in earlier grades. As opposed to a situation where learners get to seriously study English only in senior secondary school. The compulsory study of literature across grades would generally enable the learners to understand the English language in different contexts



This figure shows that 35.7% of the ESL teachers who responded to this questionnaire felt that learners should start learning English literature as early as Grade 1 while an equal proportion felt that Grade 5 would be the ideal grade to start teaching learners the study of literature. However, 25% felt that it may not work well in earlier grades and suggested it be introduced from Grade 8. Only 3.6% of the respondents suggested introducing the study of English literature from Grade 11.

Most of the respondents argued that the earlier the learners were introduced to literature, the more likely they were to understand the study of literature at senior secondary school level. The respondents further argued that the introduction of the study of literature in early grades would probably eliminate some language problems that the learners experienced in the senior secondary phase. Some also felt that Namibian learners lacked a reading culture therefore the study of literature might encourage them to read extensively from an early age.

As already indicated in this study, literature is valuable authentic material. Therefore, according to Da Silva (2001), the teacher is the grand initiator of its use and thus responsible for making it meaningful to the learners. The teacher must apply it in the best way to suit his/her clientele. Literature presents different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of written texts that include narration, dialogue, irony and exposition which underpin the importance of the teacher as the conductor of this orchestra in accessing and understanding the meaning of literary pieces.

Behind the classroom door the key factor in the success of a lesson, in determining whether the students actually learn something that matters, is the

creative ability of the teachers their ability to combine theory and practical classroom experience. Theory alone will not result in effective teaching. Nor will practice alone result in truly excellent teachers engaged in the learning process. Critical to this process is the teacher's knowledge of the subject content, and his/her ability to implement new strategies, to develop effective performance tasks, to design appropriate assessment tools, and to address the different student learning styles. Little of this can be accomplished if teachers are not knowledgeable of new research, and determined to implement it. Effective teaching therefore involves the practical application of new research/theory in a classroom environment (Stafford, 2006).

In agreement with the above assertions, Smit (2007) argues that language-based approaches seek to promote closer integration between language and literature. Teachers could support such integration through classroom procedures which foster an activity-oriented, student-centred and language-sensitive approach. This would afford excellent opportunities for enhancing problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The main aim should be to assist students to develop independent interpretations and critical literacy skills by reading through the language in the wider meanings literary texts convey.

As already stated this paper proposes a compulsory study of a literature component in the Namibian ESL syllabus. However the teachers of ESL themselves should be responsible for their own professional growth. They should make sure that what they teach and how they teach it is beneficial to their learners. As can be seen from the literature review and results of this research, it is generally believed that the study of literature, if taught tactfully, can be a source of excellent written and spoken English.

The following recommendations for the teachers are made:

- 1) Teachers should acquaint themselves with the knowledge and philosophies of teaching and learning a second language, by taking the initiative of reading relevant literature.
- 2) Teachers should take initiative in familiarising themselves with contemporary issues pertaining to the teaching of the study of literature.
- 3) Teachers should go for further studies, in-service training and attend workshops regularly to acquaint themselves with ESL teaching skills and strategies.
- 4) Teachers should be innovative to come up with strategies that could help them to cope with the challenges of teaching the study of literature.

- 5) Teachers can come up with a teacher forum, create blogs through social networking technology where they would discuss issues pertaining to their teaching.
- 6) The teachers should come up with initiatives to make sure that they (teachers) and the learners have enough resources for the study of literature.

Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012, p.209) also agree with other proponents of literature in the SL classroom, they argue that an integrated approach to the use of literature in the language classroom offers foreign language learners the opportunity to develop not only their linguistic and communicative skills but their knowledge about language in all its discourse types.

Conclusion

Proponents of the study of literature have argued that literature in a language classroom can be used to improve the writing skills of second language learners. The outcome of this study is also congruent with this argument. Most respondents generally acknowledged that the study of literature in the L2 classrooms could improve the learners' language skills. There is a serious need to equip the ESL teachers with enough skills to teach the study of literature in order to use it to improve learners' academic writing skills. Therefore, it is argued that ESL teachers should create enabling environments in their classrooms; learners should be given an opportunity to use and tease meaning out of their literature texts. These texts are directly and indirectly charged with language facets that can heighten and improve their communicative adeptness both inside and outside the ESL classroom.

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