

The Relevance of Language Awareness to Teaching Literature for EFL students

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Abstract

Language does not simply consist of vocabulary and grammar. There is much more in language that makes it work. It has functions and involves nuances when people use it for communication. Halliday (1985) says learning language means learning "how to mean". Thus students who learn foreign language should be aware of these factors in order to be able to understand how the native speakers use their language and what they mean. Teaching literature requires students to be aware of the use of language in order to get the meaning in the text. Literary works help them develop their language skills, awareness of language and culture, even critical thinking. This paper discusses how language awareness is relevant to teaching English literature. Both of them require teachers to provide students with experience how to use language in expressing their opinion, sharing ideas, investigating a variety of interpretation's as well as thinking critically.

Key words: Language Awareness, Teaching literature, EFL Students

Introduction

Language is not simply a tool used by a member of society to communicate. It is a part of human life, and plays an important role in the life of society. Language develops within a society and cultural context. The members of the community use it to socialize, exchange ideas, even to reflect on the way they think. The use of language involves nuances, situations, functions as well as the purpose of the speakers. Halliday (1985) says that learning language means learning how to mean. Therefore when learning a new language, it is not enough to just know the grammar, vocabulary and master the pronunciation. The students should be aware that there is much more they should learn. In fact they learn a foreign language in order to be able to use it functionally and purposely based on native social-cultural context. They cannot simply know the language, and then memorize it. They need to listen, read the language as well as to practice and experience the use of the language. Therefore in teaching EFL, the teachers need to provide their students practice in four language skills with a variety of activities. This is done in order to make them aware that language does not consist of rules and formulas only, but it has meaning, function and purpose.

Besides, the activities should enable students to increase the language awareness so that they will better understand, appreciate as well as use the language they learn. According to Soons (2008.p.7) language awareness is usually related to cognitive psychology and associated with the study of thinking process in learning context, i.e. how knowledge is established and how thought are organized. One of materials that could offer language use and thinking process is reading text. Krashen at the KOTESOL International conference (2011) said that reading gives room for readers to think and experience how people apply a language in reality. This happens according to Bravo (2006) since reading is an on-going interaction, going beyond the physical context of text, looking for meaning as well as processing information. Thus reading activities cannot be avoided in helping students enhance their language awareness.

Dealing with reading material, literary work is challenging since it offers different language styles and dialogues including the way people communicate. Maria Kostelnikova (2001.p.84) says literary texts are really authentic as they address their readers irrespective of context and situation. It provides a source of enjoyment, information, background, incentive for dialogue, generative task and reaction. It can open readers' eyes to new ways of looking at

experience, emotions, people, even at everyday objects in the world. Thus by reading the literary work EFL students may experience why certain expressions are uttered and in what situation they are used. Besides, reading literary text is never simply a matter of receiving or absorbing the meaning of the text. In fact the meaning is not already stated, it exists behind the text. It is the interaction between the reader and the text that produce the meaning.

This paper reviews the language awareness and how to increase it in teaching-learning process. In addition, it discusses teaching literature for EFL students and sees how it relates to language awareness.

Language Awareness

Language awareness is not a new term in teaching foreign languages. Scholars have been discussing it for a long time. Language Awareness was used by Eric Hawkins, a linguist, in 1980s as a reaction to the dominant theories in language learning based on the behaviorist principles of habit formation. But nowadays according to Jessner (.2006) quoted by Soons, Language Awareness has developed due to the social and economic development such as migration, globalization, international trade and conflict.

Then what is Language Awareness? Donmall (1985) defines Language Awareness is a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life. Sensitivity, here, is not just being aware of the effects of language, but also involves actively looking for the complexities of meaning making and interpretation. Language Awareness is not just intuitive; it is learned, thoughtful and articulate. Language is creative, personal, and it is developed within a social and cultural context. It is used by people to get things done, to relate to each other, to communicate needs and exchange ideas (in Commonwealth of Australia.2008). While ALA (The Association of Language Awareness) founded in 1994, defines Language Awareness as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use. Thus Language Awareness is made up of elements which grow within the language that cannot be avoided by the teacher and students in teaching-learning process.

The teacher should understand what Language Awareness is and how important it is to involve Language Awareness in teaching, while the students also should learn and aware that it is crucial when they learn language. Soons (2008) proposes Language Awareness should be taught to the students to enhance language acquisition. Furthermore, Soons says that teachers and students should realize that learning is a process related to oneself. Learning language should be facilitated through students' metacognition in order to improve language learning. In line with her, O'Malley and Chamot (in Dhieb-Henia .2006) explain that metacognition is dealing with the ability of students to reflect on their thinking process, to plan, monitor and evaluate aspect of their learning. This is required for reading, determining how the text will be read. For what purpose? Thus the students plan what they are going to do, and they are even able to evaluate how far they achieve in comprehension the text. Therefore teachers should really understand the concepts of Language Awareness as well as how important it is in the teaching-learning process.

Since language awareness involves cognitive and effective aspects, the students cannot simply receive the language but they have to think, clarify, analyse and question it. STELLA (Standards for Teachers of English and Literacy in Australia, 2002) claims that reading is never simply a matter of receiving or absorbing the meaning of the text. Reading is always a purposely activity. It involves prediction, interaction, framing, interpretation and active process of constructing meaning. This is supported by Borg (1994) who suggests that in language teaching and learning with Language Awareness the teacher should allow room for multiple answers that the students investigate and refine themselves. Then it is important that the students are able to communicate their ideas and perception. Reading materials can fulfil these requirements, especially if they are authentic. Unfortunately most teachers think that authentic material must be from internet or newspaper only, but this is not. Literary works are authentic material too. Indonesian's Curriculum 2013 for the school offers the song as one of the

materials for teaching. The students should have competence to get the meaning of the song. The students of SMP as well as SMA should have this competence. My question is why should it be a song? Why not poetry? While in abroad (West countries) students are familiar with literary works since they are children. Through reading the teachers are enabled to develop the ability of students in interacting with the text. This interaction will give students room to build their critical thinking so that they are able to express their own ideas even when they are different from their friends. Thus teachers should be creative to offer the activities that motivate students to be active in learning. If they are passive in receiving instruction and doing activities, it means they are very weak and cannot really learn what they have to learn.

Teaching Literature

Literary text is a creative writing, and it is not designed as teaching material. No wonder why it tends to be in debate among the scholars of teaching EFL whether it can be used for teaching material or not. Singeltone et al (in Fenner 2006)) say that any materials created to fulfill some purpose in the language community in which it was produced are called authentic. While Berado (2006) says that one of the main reason for using authentic materials in classroom is the learner will encounter how the language is really used in the real world. Moreover Kostelnikova (2001. p 86) claims that literary text is authentic material which provides example of different styles, lexical, and syntactic phrases and idioms which are often much easier to remember when used in context with the culture of the target language country. Since the text is based on the imagination of the author, by reading it the imagination of the students is stimulated, and the critical thinking as well as critical reading of the students will be developed. The chance to express opinions based on the text and the discussions they perform can build the students' self-esteem. They will realize that they are able to express ideas and feeling in a language they are learning. Besides, they are proud that they are allowed to have different ideas.

Literary works are different from scientific texts. Fenner (2006) mentions that literary text has certain characteristics such as language, content, and cultural aspects, that requires interpretation, an active encounter with potential meanings of the text. Then reading literary text according to Kostelnikova differs fundamentally from reading other text types since the relation between the text and reality is non-existent: it is gradually created by the writer and the reader. During the reading process the readers create the relationship for themselves. Bakhtin (in Fenner. p 24) describes the reading process in a similar way;” message is not transmitted from the writer to the reader, but it is constructed between them as a kind of ideological bridge, it is built in the process of their interaction. According to Iser (1994) text provides empty space between the lines that are going to be filled by the readers in their will which is influenced by their background knowledge. These gaps have different affect and stimulate meanings. In fact, meaning is not given by the text, it arises from the meeting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader with its own knowledge, experience, consciousness and outlook. Besides the meaning in literary text are mostly implicit and it is the readers who should reveal it.

Teaching literature must be interesting and challenging for teachers who really understand what literature is exactly. It is interesting since the text deals with the life of human being all over the world. Moreover most of conflicts are common such as occur between people, people and nature, then people with God. However the way characters solve the problems are different and unique that triggers the readers to think and draw their own perceptions. Then it is challenging for the literary text according to Fenner (p.24) does not speak in one tongue to all readers: different “voice” in the text will speak to different readers in different ways. The more gaps are in the text itself, the more the interpretation will vary. Since the reader is an active creator of meaning, reading literary texts is not a receptive process. That is why Iser claims that the meaning of the text is not a definable entity but a dynamic event.

There are three main reasons for teaching literary text in the classroom. Fenner describes that literary text can provide the teacher to be aware of and gain insight into the learning process which goes on within the individual. This helps them understand how their students learn exactly. Another point comes from Vygotsky (in Fenner) that is learning takes place in social

interaction. Thought is developed through language. By expressing themselves in speaking or writing motivates the students to develop their thinking as well as speaking. Finally, communication about text gives students a chance to become aware of limitations in their own understanding. By listening to and discussing what other students and the teacher express about their individual interpretation and understanding of the text, they will discover new aspect of the text, as well as personal reactions to it. Besides, the literary text represents the personal voice of the culture that makes the students understand the culture articulated in the text. Thus literary work will expand their scope and enhance their learning. Therefore, the teacher should be ready to design the tasks that trigger them to get involved in learning.

There are many literary works can be used for teaching literature, however the text should be the selected ones. It may be chosen based on its genre such as poetry, prose or drama even essay or the topic which is challenging for discussion. According to Fenner a carefully selected Literary text positively influences the readers motivation for reading. This happens especially when the topic of the text deals with the issue which the learner can express their own personal opinion and experience, which becomes a strong motivational factor. Moreover Soons (2008) says that it is vital to give required means to the pupils to stimulate them to learn how to learn. While Van (quoted by Kurnia Ningsih, 2013) suggests that the teacher should consider the language used in the text where it may match the level of students. However the difficult of vocabularies and cultural material cannot be avoided. The author may use the casual words, slang or even the words that has been found in local dialect. This is done to make the stories life and ordinary. Aghgolzadeh and Tajabadi (quoted by Kurnia Ningsih, 2013) state that the difficulties found in literary text may preclude teaching language which is the main goal of language teacher. The students should face it and it will be challenging if the teacher can apply some interesting strategies in teaching.

Let's see the example below, short story that I used in my literature class at English department, University of Padang as well as in private university. This story was used in the second week of the first prose's class for students who sat in the fourth semester. The story with the title *The girl who married a fly* (2011) is an Australian short story. The story is about the 14 years old girl who is falling love with the fly which she found accidentally at the bottom of her coffee mug when she came back from school. Ironically the family is very clean and hates the insects. I gave it to the students on the first week so that they could read out of class in group. The classroom is only for the discussion, not for reading. At glance it is not interesting, however after the discussion the students realized that there are many things can be learned from the text which sounds ridiculous at the beginning. This story can be used with any level of students as long as the teacher can apply the suitable strategies.

In the class on the second week, I started by giving classic questions "How do you feel after reading the story? A few students looked down on the story by saying: should the story be read? I don't believe people get married to flies. This story is ridiculous. It is nonsense. Then I started with the questions; Ok look at it again, *what is the conflict?* Nobody can answer correctly. They just say Madison and fly, her boy friend and her mother etc. They did not pay attention *What makes the conflict occur? in what situation do the whole family get involved in conflict? How do they refuse what they don't like?.* Surely the students could not answer the questions since they never were challenged to think when they read. No wonder they could not answer the questions. All the questions I gave forced them to read and think critically.

Let's pay attention to the quotation below that's quite funny and ridiculous.

"How Old is Oliver Madison's mother asked.

Three, Madison said, But in fly years he's seventeen. And he's got a tattoo.

'A tattoo! Oh yuck' her mum said. A tattoo of what?'

'A horse, Mum!'

'A horse? What for?'

'I don't know. It's none of my business. He likes horses' (P.7)

The text shows how the teenager has more knowledge than the older people whose thinking sometime is influenced by their emotion. Their action sometimes is opposite with what they say all the time. They may keep telling the young to think positively and not get involve in people's business.

'where is the tattoo?' her mother asked. 'On his chest or his legs?

" it's on his bottom!' Madison said'

'Madison. You haven't been looking at his bottom! Her mother was horrified.

'I can't help it, Mum. Oliver doesn't wear clothes'

'Her mother was silent. Then she said:" Madison, if you must go out with a fly I would prefer that you go out with one who wears clothes'.

(7)

"Mum!' Madison protested, are you living in the real world or what?.

Flies don't wear clothes

The other quotation shows the nature of human being. It is easy for people to change their mind easily when they know something will give them advantages even though it sounds ridiculous.

"All right, Ms Winfrey. We'd love to come over to Chicago' Madison's mother was smiling into the phone." Yes, next week. Yes, That's a lot of money. Yes. Oliver is just the lovelist little fly. Very clean. Never complains. Yes, he eats with us. He has his own plate. No I don't mind the extra washing up. Bye, Next week then'.(p. 12)

There are techniques of teaching literature derived from the literary Approach. A Close reading from a Formalist approach should be applied. Guerin (quoted by Kurnia Ningsih) states that the teachers should lead the students to read in detail: be sensitive to the words of the text, both denotation and connotation values and implications and be aware of the multiple meaning. This is supported by Guth and Rico (in Kurnia Ningsih) who say that literary text should be read carefully, line by line. Be open minded to whatever the text has to offer, and then try to get a sense of its overall pattern. These ways stimulate the students not to underestimate easily the text they read. Besides they are definitely going to realize and understand that the meanings of the literary works are not stated explicitly.

Naturally people read the text with questions. These questions lead them to find something in the text. However the questions will change on the second reading so that they have chance to change their perception and give them a chance to find a different meaning. This will lead them to find out meaning which are not stated in the text clearly. Therefore the teachers should ask students to read the text several times with questions in their mind. The questions are supposed to come from the students but since they are not used to, it is the teachers' responsibility to offer them. This should be taught to them so that they will read and think critically. Sheng (2000) categories the questions into four: 1) Literal questions that lead students to recognize and recall since the answers are already stated clearly in the text; 2) Inferential, that demands thinking and imagination. They have to think since the meaning is not clearly stated; 3) Evaluation, that requires students to make judgments about the content of their reading which involves their knowledge and thought; 4) Appreciation, which involves their knowledge and emotional response to literary techniques, forms and styles. The questions that should be offered more in teaching literature are evaluation and appreciation.

However Fenner (2006) merely suggests two kinds of questions: close and authentic questions. The close questions are such as, *who is the main character, where didit happen, who is the protagonist, who has conflict etc.* This type of questions is the same as literal. The questions make students produce the correct answer but they do not produce language. There is no real dialogue since there is no exchange of information. The answers are stated clearly in the text. They are known to the majorities of students in the class. These activities tend to lead them to find the difficult words. While the authentic questions are the ones which pose questions

about the students' own interpretations and opinion of the text. Thus the resulting answers will vary information to everyone including the teacher. Different view will be exposed and can give students new perspectives and increase understanding of the text. Besides the teachers might also see the text in a different light, and will understand who really reads the text and thinks about the meaning. Fenner adds that the teachers keep an open mind towards new interpretations so that there is no one a correct answer. The more you teach like this the more students learn and are brave to say something different even though sometime they are wrong at the beginning.

When teaching literature it is not enough to lead students to read the literary text only. The aim of learning is more than just understanding: it is interpreting, and emotionally responding to the text. However the students should be able to evaluate the character, conflict, setting, text itself and to reveal the implicit meaning of the text. Therefore metacognitive strategies should be applied and analytical method should be taught in teaching-learning process. The students should get the chance to express their opinion or perception, evaluate and reflect on their thinking process from what they have already read. Fenner suggests that the teacher should actively engage the students in the learning process and give them opportunities to express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings. This technique is derived from a reader-respond approach. It is excellence if the teachers can carry out the activities that involve students to think and share their ideas. It should be remembered that the aims in the class is not to achieve a perfect interpretation of the literary text but it is created to be an incentive for discussion, for expressing controversial and critical opinion and raising Language Awareness as well as Cultural Awareness.

Conclusion

Having discussed the language awareness and teaching literature above, it can be concluded that both of them are relevant. Language Awareness is explicit knowledge about language, conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use. Therefore in teaching-learning process, the teachers should be creative in applying the strategies that enable students to experience the use of language they learn. The teachers should involve the students as much as possible with the language use. Teaching literature provide room for students to practice language they learn both cognitively and effectively. Literary texts engage students in personal and meaningful activities where they read and get the chance to express the meaning they get from the text. They articulate to others, while other students may get different meanings so that they can interact each other. Besides literary text provide the students with the variety of language use, vocabularies and grammar as well as the basic skills of language through different dialogue and communicative models. The students are going to realize that people use language purposely and functionally and become aware of why they get a specific response.

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