

**Working with Literature in the English Classroom:
Laotian folk-tales and Bangladeshi short stories**

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Abstract

The present paper is based on workshops done in Laos and Bangladesh in 2009. The basic idea of these workshops was to explore the use of literature as support for language teaching and learning. This article is divided into two parts: first, a theoretical view exploring issues and concerns related to the use of literature in the language class; second, a description of the activities performed in the workshops.

Introduction

Literature, particularly in a foreign language, is often seen as something remote and far removed from “ordinary” language. One of the aims of the workshop activities is to show that literature is not necessarily a language apart.

One general point to be raised is the use of student-generated literature as motivating material. English students normally experience a real sense of achievement when tackling literary materials in the classroom. In the case of learners’ literature in English, it can provide an interesting and thought-provoking point of comparison. Regarding cultural background, literature can provide students with access to the culture of the language they are studying and, in the case of students’ literature in English, they can gain a fresh view of their own culture.

Literature in the language classroom

Why? What? How?

Collie and Slater (2003) have successfully answered these commonly asked questions.

Why? There is such an incredible variety of materials designed for learning English. Why use literary texts then? The simplest reason is that literature offers authentic material and not material intended for teaching a language. Therefore, students have to cope with language intended for native speakers without simplification and adaptation for foreign learners. Thus, learners gain familiarity with different linguistic uses and forms. However, the language of literary works is not typical of daily life and we would not like our students to think that “And I will make thee beds of roses” is a kind of utterance lovers commonly use. The positive side is that literary works provide such a rich context that shows lexical and syntactical items in use

and thus makes them more memorable. The above-mentioned features lead us to the next aspect to be considered: what literary works we can use in the classroom.

What? What sort of literary works are suitable for the language classroom? The criteria of suitability depend on several aspects: the group of learners, level, curriculum, and interests. We suggest two considerations when choosing a literary text: language difficulty according to the level of the students, and meaningfulness which is able to stimulate personal involvement of learners.

How? Once a text has been chosen, how best can teachers and learners work with it? We herein outline some of the aims that guided our search:

- (a) Syntactical items in study
- (b) Cultural background
- (c) Feasibility of a wide variety of student-centered activities
- (d) Feasibility of activities that allow research and vocabulary enhancement
- (e) Length of texts that allows reading of all the text in class

From the huge field of literature we have chosen short stories and folk-tales for the activities in the workshops.

Stories and folk-tales

Stories and folk-tales serve teachers and learners in the classroom as a highly natural means of teaching in two main ways: they provide a rich cultural content and a means of teaching language. Wajnryb (2005) proposes the analysis of three conditions of language learning with stories:

- (a) Exposure: this refers to the potential of stories as “comprehensible input,” i.e., language that is within the range of access of the learner. In this sense, literature in the language classroom encourages language acquisition because reading literary texts becomes an important way of increasing the language input in the classroom. Besides this, even if the focus of an activity with literary texts is a grammatical point, the activity will somehow encourage students to share their feelings and opinions.
- (b) Motivation: the dynamic unfolding of stories involves and engages the learners, and expands their language awareness. Using literature can help students to become more sensitive to special uses of the words and learn to go beyond them. For example, in the story “Roots” by Syeda Rhaman, the word “border” is not just the geographical boundary but it also refers to parting of lovers and shattered dreams. Therefore, it is not

only the story itself –content and meaning- but also the special relation between words and narrative which makes stories particularly useful for language teaching.

- (c) Use refers to exchange of meanings: use of the language to do things with the story and use of the story to learn language. Thus, literature in the language classroom helps to develop students' interpretative abilities because texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning. Teachers can take advantage of this multiplicity of meanings with tasks that accompany, precede or follow the story, thus giving learners further opportunities to use the language.

Activities

This part of the work offers a description of the activities carried out in the three workshops. The proposed activities focus on the following aspects:

- (a) Skills within the text: reading and grammar. These activities are centered on what is actually said in the text.
- (b) Skills beyond the text: writing and speaking. These activities encourage students to use their imagination and go beyond the limits of the text.

The following activities were during the following workshops: *Xieng Mieng for Learning English* at the Lao American College (Vientiane). *Stories by Women Writers from Bangladesh* at the American International University (Dhaka) and UKBET (Sylhet).

1. Warming-up

Take between 5 and 7 minutes to elicit some basic vocabulary: novel, short-story, poem, essay, etc. and use it in questions and answers.

What's the name of your favorite novel?

My favorite novel is by

2. Introduction to Literature

These two activities allow students a first contact with the literary field. Many learners might be unwilling to read literary works because they are rooted in traditions, cultural, social or religious aspects that could be new for young learners. That is why it seems well worth spending some time on orientation about the characteristics of the literature of their country, its main themes or characters.

- (a) Complete the text. Participants practiced gap-filling with a text of about 250-300 words

related to the characteristics of literature in Laos and Bangladesh.

- (b) Roses of ideas and mappings. This activity was done in Bangladesh after the gap-filling activity and participants produced mappings. In Laos it was accomplished after the scrambled stories activity; one group of participants referred to a noun related to the character Xieng Mieng: trick (Fig. 1).

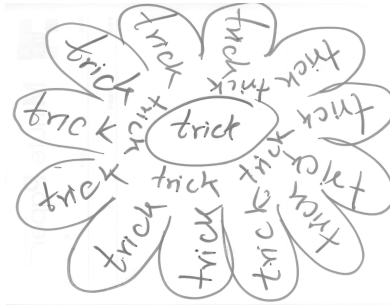


Fig.1. Rose of ideas made by a group of students in Vientiane

3. Runaway lines

Choose two or three short stories, take several sentences from each of them and mix the sentences. Provide the learners with the titles of the stories and ask them to put each sentence under the corresponding title. In this activity students learn to look for clues, to mark features in language, and to make relations in meaning.

4. Split sentences

This activity can be graded to suit the students' language level. Choose one story, take several sentences from it, divide the sentences into A and B, and give A to one group of learners and B to another. Ask learners to re-construct the sentences, using words from A and B (Fig.2). The sentences can be selected in order to illustrate particular aspects of language, such as the use of a tense, or nouns, subject-predicate structure, etc. The activity combines constraint with freedom; the material itself is controlled but several combinations might be possible. Hopefully, isolated sentences can arouse curiosity and the same story can be used for further activities.

| A | B |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Lal Miah had stayed | a. be free again |
| 2. He would never | b. streamed down his cheeks |
| 3. His eyes | c. late in the afternoon, after the Asr prayer |
| 4. Tears of rage | d. awake all night |
| 5. Hashu Banu came | e. had desperately looked for Hashu |

Fig.2. Part of the worksheet used by participants in the workshops in Bangladesh

6. Scrambled stories

This is a very appropriate activity for allowing learners to read, read and read! Choose a story and cut it into stripes which learners will put in order until they get the complete story. At the Lao American College, participants worked in groups, each one using a different folk-tale from the book *Xieng Mieng: The Cleverest Man in the Kingdom*. In order to give learners almost complete independence it is advisable to choose shorter stories so that they can be printed in large sheets and hung on the walls for learners to check and read again!

7. Biographies

This is an activity appropriate for practicing past tense or vocabulary related to literature while working with all the class. Choose a well-known writer and delete either the verbs or the vocabulary related to his/her literary works; make as many gaps as the number of learners (or double that number), number them and also write the numbers on little pieces of paper. Allow participants a limited time for work and then ask them to pick pieces of paper and fill the corresponding gap.

8. Characters

From a novel, short story or autobiography, select a striking character sketch. Prepare for each character a short list of prompts, adjectives which might or might not apply to the character described. In groups, students decide which of the prompt adjectives are the most or least appropriate for the character. They should find words or lines in the text to support their decision. In Bangladesh we worked with characters from the story *Motijan's Daughters*, by Selina Hossain.

Motijan looked at her husband with her eyes wide. His appearance was always bewildered, his eyes bloodshot and he was totally indifferent about family life. He had absolutely no interest in household affairs. He frequented a den where he smoked ganja with his friends. He was a regular ruffian and thought nothing of spending money on a woman named Rosoi who had a place in the market. Neither his mother nor his wife was of any concern to him. Realizing this truth, Motijan grew hard.

9. *Incomplete passage or story-lines without end*

Provide learners with a passage and ask them to imagine what happens, what is going to happen, what the characters say or what they are going to say, and produce context, dialogue and a title for the story. In Bangladesh, we worked with story-lines without endings and participants provided a rich historical context. However, it is important to remind students that the purpose of the activity is not to guess the right explanation, but to speculate on what the words might mean, that is, the students can create their own context.

Roots, by Syeda Farida Rahman

We were both students at Dhaka Medical College.

Then one day we were both doctors.

I was left in this side of the border – you crossed to the other side.

Nearly twelve years have passed since then. You will come back . . .

10. *Feelings*

This is a challenging and enjoyable activity, and the emphasis should be put on imagination. Students can refer to feelings they think the characters experience or feelings awakened in themselves. In Laos, participants expressed feelings elicited by lines taken from a story by Bounyavong (Fig.3).

| Story: <i>What a beauty!</i> By Outhine Bounyavong | Feelings |
|--|----------|
| She was the only girl who was still sitting alone because no man had offered her a garland. | |
| “Poor Phaengkham. She has to go on slapping at mosquitoes as usual. These men are so completely hardhearted. Couldn’t they at least offer her one dance . . . just enough to stretch her limbs?” | |
| “Wow, Phaengkham is dancing! I bet it’s going to rain . . .” | |
| “Oh, those girls . . . They are gone. Some of them fled the country, and some didn’t do well and became ‘no good’ so the government sent them to be reeducated in Dorn Nang.” | |

Fig.3. Part of the worksheet done by participants in the workshop at the Lao American College in Vientiane.

Conclusion

One of the things we had in mind at the time of choosing literature as a resource was that “literature is always more than the language and that appreciation and enjoyment of literature

transcend that development of linguistic capacities” (Carter and McRae, 1996:xxv). Therefore, we chose working with learners’ literature considering that if the door to literary works is already open it could lead more naturally to enjoying the trip. It is highly expected that participants (students and teachers) profited from the proposed activities based on learners’ literature.

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Biographical Statement

Cecilia Silva is currently teaching Spanish at Tohoku University, Sendai. She is interested in media literacy, critical literacy, literature, and cultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning.