

LEARNING LANGUAGE THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Could we move away from regular text books and workbooks to teach language? The answers to this question keep getting revised as researchers come up with new approaches and methods. In this paper, we would be looking at why and how to use children's literature in ESL classes for adult learners. We explore how this literature easily blends into various learning approaches that we employ in our classrooms. Children's literature has immense potential that educators could harness in order to make their classes appealing and engaging.

Key words: language, literature, children's literature, activities and tasks

Introduction

Every literature student attempts frantically to explain the question: what is literature? The answer is a process of exploration and discovery. Sartre explains it as 'committed writing about action'. Arthur Gibson in *What is Literature* explores the kinds of books that could be considered as a 'candidate for being literature' (Gibson, pg.87). He looks at travel writing, biographies/autobiographies (Hitler's *Mein Kampf* included), creative and imaginative writings, all that is traditionally classified as literature, fictional histories, historical fiction and others. Terry Eagleton in his essay *Introduction: What is Literature?* tries to define literature through the elimination method. Aspects that we usually consider important to literature are taken up to show how they may or may not be the characteristics of literature. He examines proposed definitions of literature from different perspectives to show there are no fixed boundaries to encompass literature. It could then, be said that literature is a construct.

Similarly, Peter Nodelman in *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* questions the label 'children's literature'. He offers this point of view: '...the characteristics of ... children's literature relate most centrally not to the actual characteristics of their intended audience but to the ideas that producers and consumers have about those audiences'. (Nodelman, pg.5). In fact, adults find books listed as children's literature equally fascinating. They write 'children's books', they buy them for their children; it then is their world that they offer children with elements of imagination, fantasy, creative language, illustrations and a tinge of reality. Cultural constructs of the contexts in which 'children's books' have been

written also play a significant role as Hunt puts it in *Understanding Children's Literature*, 'children's books are a part of the ideological structures of the cultures of the world' (pg. 4). We could then go back to Nodelman and conclude that it is essentially the reading process/reader which lends meaning to a text i.e., how well could a reader identify with the given text; rather than the category that a text belongs to.

My contention, then, is we could use the books defined as 'children's literature' to learn language at any stage. As ESL educators, we are looking at innovative and creative methods and techniques to make our learners learn English. Various activities based on different approaches as discussed in the *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* could be devised to make our classes engaging as well as interesting. For example, as a communicative language teaching activity, we could ask learners to design questionnaires and conduct a survey.

When adult learners get to know that children's literature would be used as authentic material to teach them, they would be more motivated considering that the language would be (apparently) fun, simple and easy to read. As Peter Hunt says in *Understanding Children's Literature*, 'children's books are a matter of private delight, which means, perhaps, that they are real literature - if 'literature' consists of texts which engage, change and provoke intense responses in readers.' (pg. 1) Given this from the learners' point of view, we as educators must consider that children's books are more complex than what they are generally perceived to be (pg.2); which in turn gives us a lot of scope to generate activities and thought-provoking exercises for our language classes.

Researches that link language and children's literature

Before we look at children's literature in particular, there is one book I would like to draw our attention to – *Literature as a way of knowing* by Kathy G. Short. According to her, there are four major reasons why literature could be used in classes:

- It helps learners read and write
- It enhances learning in all possible content areas i.e., social studies, sciences, mathematics etc.
- It serves as a medium to know and understand the world.
- It broadens our horizons as we encounter different societies and cultures through books

She goes on to say that through 'real books', 'learners learn language, learn about language and learn through language'. Further, literature opens a window to others' experiences that we could connect to and hence, enlarge our 'life spaces', and our intercultural understanding. As we relate to occurrences across time and space, we transfer or transport them to our lives

and look at our environment and for that matter, ourselves from a different perspective, we could then say that literature has the ‘power to transform’. It ‘stretches our imagination and encourages us to go beyond ‘what is’ to ‘what might be’.

Let us for instance, consider the Animal Picture Book *Ocean*. It provides us a glimpse of the world under water through interesting facts about aquatic animals. Vivid illustrations add to the learning experience. The reader feels a part of the text as the writer asks, ‘Can you walk like a crab?’ This read-aloud then, widens our spheres of knowledge as well as takes through a universe which do not encounter in daily life.

The PDF presentation by Newfoundland Labrador Education on *Using Children’s Literature with ESL Students* enumerates around 18 - 19 reasons why children’s literature could be used to learn English. These could be broadly grouped as developing integrated language skills, intercultural understanding, stimulating activities, literary and visual appreciation and also important, that it serves as resources across age-groups and across proficiency levels of learners. Further, the texts provide an enriching contextualized language learning experience through repetitive and predictable text, simple sentence structures and immense possibilities for follow-up activities. The presentation details how the pre-reading, reading and post-reading tasks could be conducted. It presents how an interaction on a text could take place using the example ‘Fire on the Mountain’ by Jane Kurtz. Post-reading activities have also been suggested.

The website for Centre for Adult English Language Acquisition points out the criteria that could be used to select books for a one’s class. First of all, we must check if the selected book meets our curricular objectives. The other things that are important are authentic cultural content, language patterns, illustrations, universal themes and messages. The website page correspondingly tells us about teaching strategies that we could use, extension activities as well as recommends some books.

Brown in *Using Children’s Literature for Young Learners* suggests ways to overcome the challenges that one could face in using children’s literature. The challenges are:

- Selecting an appropriate and relevant to curriculum book
- How to teach, how to create support materials
- Devising post-reading activities/tasks

Apart from those that CAELA mentions, Brown notes other reasons which could govern our selection of books. We could choose what the learners would find interesting, would be enthusiastic and enjoy reading. Hence, the books should not have too long or complex stories. Suggested types of activities, and teaching ideas would help educators conduct a smooth and engaging class.

Kathleen F. Malu in her article entitled *Exploring Children's Picture Storybooks with Adult and Adolescent EFL Learners* makes a very valid observation, 'It is the interaction between the visual and the verbal that defines this genre.' As Brown and CAELA use quality of illustrations as criteria for selecting a children's book, this article elaborates on the same, 'Good' illustrations convey movement, emotions and/or humour.' They play a key role in maintaining a reader's interest and add to the storyline. They hence forge a bond between the visual and aural receptiveness. Further, children's literature encompasses fiction as well as non-fiction; one could also find variations in format. She rationalizes her choice of children's picture storybooks, 'It includes theory and practice in second language acquisition, content- or theme based instruction, social learning theory and contemporary literacy, including digital literacy.' Drawing on Krashen and Gee, she establishes how children's picture storybooks 'lower the affective filter' and 'stimulate interest'. She, then summarizes Ho and Reid's research according to which if high quality books are chosen for adults, learners' speaking skills improve immensely, they read confidently and they could be easily drawn into discussions since the lexical items, the cultural and linguistic information as well as the themes are exceptionally stimulating.

Adding to Brown and CAELA, she enumerates resources that we could consider while we select our books. For one, we could consider books that have received international acclaim; second, books that do not promote racism or sexism and third, independent booksellers who specialize in children's literature. The themes that one could elicit out of these books are diverse. Ranging from philosophy to character values, we could use these books to teach anything and everything. Like Kathy Short, she draws our attention to conducting author studies – different books by the same author. It is interesting to note that Malu includes a topic on how to use a children's book in a large class where, she asserts, seating arrangement is vital.

Writer's perspective

The above discussed observations are based on researches conducted outside India. We as Indian educators could take a cue from these practices/studies and implement them in our classrooms. We do not have to stick to our formal textbooks for colleges/universities and dismiss the use of children's literature. Children's literature could be used for hands-on learning experiences. In case we have huge classrooms, we could work in groups with different children's books. Not only would our learners enjoy the experience but also develop their creative and critical thinking skills. We certainly have a prescribed syllabus to complete but as an educator, our objective is mainly to help our learners develop a fascination for the language in such a way that they become lifelong learners and are motivated to know more. This could especially be true for regional language medium learners who join English

medium college/universities anxiously; though they often write and read the language, they are not exposed enough to speaking and listening tasks.

Let us now look at how children's literature fits into our teaching approaches and methods. Two major questions arise –

- Could we use children's literature to cater to multiple intelligences?
- How could we use it for competency based language teaching, cooperative language learning, task based language learning, and communicative language teaching?

Let us answer the first one first. Connecting Richards and Short, we could say that language is not an independent entity to be taught separately. It is an integral part of our daily life, of all subjects. We could then say that every subject teacher is a language teacher. However, language needs special attention too. Learning language in a language class helps us look at subjects as an opportunity to apply what has been learnt. It would then, be easier for us educators to teach language through themes. In order to cater to a class of multiple intelligences, we must design and devise a variety of activities under these themes. Given this framework, children's literature could be neatly tailored into our curriculum as we, first of all, classify books under the themes that we would like to include in class. For example, *Maisy at the Fair* could be categorized as Leisure. One would like to visit a fair in free time. Activities like telling a story about what happened when you visited a fair last time, making an advertisement-poster for a fair, a role-play on the story that has been narrated, writing a poem on one's experience etc. could be devised so that all kinds of intelligences would be addressed.

Let us now answer the second question. Competency based language learning focuses learning outcomes – which would essentially mean the world in which we will be using language. This demands that educators create tasks which would involve life like situations; for example, a role-play of *Maisy* buying a ticket at the counter. For a listening activity, we could play an audio of *Maisy*, *Eddie* and *Tallulah* discussing on what to do during the day. We could record this with other colleagues and play it in the class. We take task based language learning into account as we devise tasks that the learners would complete to acquire language skills. In the last but one example of role-play, the learners have a task at hand – brainstorm and think of how many characters they would like to involve, create a script for the role play, decide roles and enact. Each task would however, need a job description for the participants – for instance, if there are four participants in the role-play task, the challenge is to create a script in such a way that each one makes his/her presence felt on the stage. So they would have to come up with something innovative than just a ticket seller and *Maisy* on the dais. This activity is also a good example of communicative language learning as they would. Learners would be collaborating with each other and pool in their ideas on the activity and

hence would cooperate with each other to learn the language. This ensures cooperative language learning.

Having ascertained the place of children's literature in our scheme of work, we now have to determine what kind of books from children's literature we want to use in class. We would need to classify our learners not based on their age but on their language proficiency. Depending on our learners, we could books either to teach grammatical items or vocabulary or sentence structures. We could restrict them as a base for activities.

Let us look at an example – *Old MacDonald had a farm*. This text leads itself to creating a variety of learning opportunities for different kinds of learners. We could divide our class into groups based on below average, average and above average learners. This would allow us to focus on the learners and build on their knowledge; assign activities according to their abilities or even, modify the activities. I suggest no team has more than five members so that the educator could ensure that each member has something valid and relevant to contribute to the task and also, does not feel left out. Below are enlisted a few activities that we could conduct in our classes.

- We could begin our lessons on this text by first putting up only the title of the text on the board and asking each team to weave a text (250 words) of any kind – story, poem, essay – based on the title. This is a task that all teams could perform based on their writing skills. The text could then be shared with the entire class and each group could be asked to provide only positive feedback on the text. I suggest the educator alone points out the improvement areas so that the learners are more likely to accept it since it comes from an authority.
- We could next put up the cover page of the text along with the title and give learners time to edit their text as they wish to.
- The educator would do a read aloud of the book and then, give a copy of the text to all groups and ask each group to do a read-aloud. The educator could note down the feedback and then, talk to each group on improvement strategies and their strengths. Though this could be a simple task for the above average learners, their reading could serve as a yardstick for the other groups to follow. The educator could frame questions according to the group in advance so to check comprehension.
- This text could be used to introduce onomatopoeic words. Each group could then be asked to make a list of onomatopoeic words that they know and then, share the list with the others.

Following tasks could be allotted as one per group based on their strengths. Learning objectives could be used as criteria to check or assess the final outcome of the tasks. Assigning job descriptions to each learner in a group would help ensure that a single learner does not complete the task.

- Create an advertisement for MacDonald's farm.
- Role-play : Visit to MacDonald's farm
- A report on MacDonald's farm
- Interview with MacDonald. Questions like these could be considered – How do you run your farm? What are the government subsidies that you get? Have leopards ever attacked your farm (this could connect to the recent incidents reported in the newspapers about leopards attacking farms in villages)?

Apart from this, as an extended activity, educators could look at assigning each student a project. An occupation would be given and the learner has to conduct an extensive research on the same and make a presentation. For this activity, I recommend using occupations that the learners do not frequently come across; for instance, a wine-taster, a pear-diver, an anthropologist, an archaeologist etc.

In our classrooms, we could establish learning centers for listening, reading and writing, play time, creativity and speaking activities. In the listening center for instance, the learners could be asked to listen to the song and fill in the blanks; in the reading center, the learner could be asked to read a similar story and respond to a few questions; in the play time center, we could ask learners to play scrabble; in the creativity center, we could ask learners to draw, paint, act, write poems, scripts etc.; in the speaking center, we could conduct debates and elocution. Each group would be able to try a center at a given time. If we have large classrooms, we might not be able to accommodate all learners which means we would need to have more centers or design more activities.

Let us now consider the book 'First Day of Spring' by Sharon Gordon. Following are the activities that we could look at –

- Brainstorm: What is your idea of a special day? Which days in your life do you feel are special? Why?
- Each learner could write an invitation inviting their friend to spend a special day with them.
- Learners in groups could make a presentation using power point/any presentation software on the following topics:
 - Seasons – when and how questions to be addressed – one season for each team
 - Festivals celebrated in a given season – one festival per season for each team

- The teams not participating in the presentations could create a mind map using graphic organizers of the information is being shared.
- The text will then be read aloud. Questions will be asked for comprehension to each team depending on the level of learners.
- Then learners would be given the text. Each team will read the text aloud. Relate the presentation and the invitation to the text.
- Listen to a weather forecast on TV and write a note predicting tomorrow's weather.
- Create a questionnaire and conduct a survey based on presentations and add new questions about preferences, travelling, food that people like to eat in a given season etc. (each team gets a different season to work on or at least a different theme under a given season to work on). Conduct a brainstorming session with the teams on what would they like to work on.
- Read Saki's short story 'The Open Window'. Discuss: would you call it a special day in the protagonist's life? Does it enrich your day to read such a story?

Both the texts from children's literature act as a diving board from where the educator and learners could take a plunge into real-life tasks. They embark on a journey of exploring how to use language in context. They learn through contextualization. The core then, is to use these texts which are often discarded by custodians of higher education as something not meant for adults.

We must keep in mind that using children's literature in classroom requires a lot of homework on the educator's part; reading it before giving it to the students, devising pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities and of course, conducting the activities efficiently and effectively such that each learner benefits. Putting into practice this method demands a lot of energy, creativity and adequate classroom management skills. However, we could be sure that we would make a difference in the language learning process of the learners. These books apart from language would help educators inculcate everlasting values which would mould the learner for life.

Conclusion

In addition to other authentic material that we use in class, we could now use children's literature to sustain our learners' interest in studying language which they often presume is a dry class in lectures and exercises on grammar and enormous writing practice tasks. Using children's literature books would appeal to all kinds of learners with different skills and learning styles. As educators, we could set up a variety of tasks that would invite learners to stay focused and at the same time work in collaboration with other subject educators as the amount of work required for each theme increases. The creative and critical thinking skills involved and the stories would encourage learners to reflect and meditate on their areas of improvement as well as their strength. The learners would take home an enriching language learning experience.

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