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SYMBIOTIC INTERFACE BETWEEN LITERATURE, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

There has been a long tradition of engaging with literary texts for language learning across Europe and in the USA: both for the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/ EFL) and modern foreign languages. With the emergence of communicative language teaching in the 1980s, a revival in using literary texts as part of the EFL curriculum took place. As literature is intricately related with a plurality of social and cultural contexts, not only through the use of plot, characterization and theme to dramatize, illustrate and schematize the values, attitudes, concepts and relations of a given cultural moment; but also, arguably through the use of ordinary language, such as modes of address, expressions of time and place, and choice of vocabulary, literary texts have also been used to acquire cultural knowledge and to engage with the values, beliefs and traditions of foreign cultures. The use of literature encourages students to make connections between the target culture and their own knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, while discouraging them from developing rigid cultural stereotypes based on overgeneralized typographies. The purpose of this study is to show how schema theory induces cultural awareness and how it can be used to promote cultural awareness through the novel entitled "Never Let Me Go" by Ishiguro.

Keywords: Schema Theory, Using literature in ESL/ EFL contexts, Cultural awareness.

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) focuses on both processes and goals in classroom learning. The method attached the term 'communicative competence' a distinct emphasis for language use within the frame of foreign or second language learning in the early 1970s (Habermas, 1970; Hymes, 1972; Jakobovits, 1970; Savignon, 1985). With the rise of communicative approach, the belief of the immediate need for language learners to communicate the target language was emphasized since the need for oral communication gained importance over other skills and the Grammar-Translation method was unable to stay popular in language learning and teaching (Shastri, 2010: 33). Also called the Reading Approach, Grammar- Translation method tended to obscure the process of gaining an understanding of large chunks of text (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). It is obvious that little attempt was made in Grammar-Translation method to help learners go beyond the mere answering of questions to a discovery of what it was in literature. As a natural outcome of the so-called

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Communicative Approach, fluency gained more importance over accuracy, errors were considered a natural component of language learning, and most importantly teaching language became skills based. Within the framework of CLT, language learning is considered as both an educational and a political issue as language teaching is inextricably connected to language policy. Viewed from a multicultural and an international perspective, language learning requires varied sociopolitical contexts as well as a diverse set of teaching strategies (Savignon, 2002: 4). Moreover, in today's ESL/ EFL language classrooms, learners are expected to study the target language within the presented academic subject content presented by the teachers. Thus, the skills are of paramount importance in order to understand the intended meaning resided in texts.

Language teachers have tended to employ one of the landmark skills in language teaching: the *reading* skill, which involves the exchange of meaningful language between language learners. Sometimes erroneously called a passive skill, reading, in fact, differs from speaking or writing as any reading process requires the learner to use their mental processing actively and to communicate in a meaningful way (Chastain, 1988: 216). Reading holds a vital place in language learning and teaching alike; thus ESL / EFL learners need to learn the need to read for communication.

Reading gives the reader the chance to get effective exposure to the target language and it has a crucial educational value (Shastri, 2010: 78). Since learners' interests vary, selection of materials is of paramount importance in order to have learners involved in language learning thoroughly. Content processing emphasizes the fact that reading involves the process of relating new knowledge to the old knowledge as contemporary theory focuses on the process rather than the exclusive teaching of reading (Falk, 1973: 388). With the advent of the concept of reading, the fact that the systematized reading activities require the language learner to operate their mental systems in order to recreate the writer's meaning was given attention; thus the need to involve the language learner in engaging and authentic texts has been given particular prominence in second language reading theory.

Schank and Abelson (1977) emphasize the concept of *script* to acknowledge the role of previous knowledge and the process of building hypotheses during reading with the aim of processing discourse. They believe script is crucial for the readers to comprehend discourse in that scripts are preplanned and conventional sequence of actions and they help readers to comprehend a well-known situation more easily. Theoretical support for this view of communication is inherent within the body of *schema theory* (Chastain, 1988: 222). In addition to bottom-up reading and top-down reading views as models of the process reading, the importance of the reader's background information has gained prominent support within the body of second language reading theory. As Immanuel Kant pointed out in the late 1700s, new ideas, new information and new concepts can have meaning only when they can be associated to something the individual already knows (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983: 554). Thus, within the body of the psycholinguistic model of reading suggested by Goodman (1967, qtd. in Hudson, 1982), schema theory acknowledges the fact that reading process requires the learners to operate their cognitive faculties in order to comprehend the message embodied within the text. Goodman (1971: 135) asserts that 'reader reconstructs, as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display.' Anderson (1984) also claims that readers already have some background information when they approach the reading texts. The comprehension of the meaning embodied within the text is grasped based on this interaction between the reader's background information and the reading process. The meaning is constructed as a result of an ongoing, cyclical process of experimenting with the input text with the readers building hypotheses, confirming and revising these hypotheses and experimenting with the text further. Thus, past experiences of any reader play a major role in reading process considering the fact that previous knowledge affects the comprehension of the target reading task. Cook (1991: 54) also affirms the position by pointing out the fact that making sense of a

particular text becomes far more straightforward and the comprehension level is higher when the topic is known.

The supporters of CLT regard language learning process as transactional. Therefore, learners cooperate more in the target language when they are engaged in a range of social contexts since language is contingent upon culture. While psycholinguistic aspect helps considerably in order to understand the nature of the reading process, reading particularly bears a prominent cultural side as well as learners bring their values, beliefs and attitudes which reflect their own pattern of beliefs and ways of thinking into ESL / EFL contexts (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). Moreover, for ESL / EFL contexts, an awareness of culture plays a crucial role for some reasons. First, cultural awareness helps the language teacher to consider the level of understanding of cultural aspects and the teachers might simply overlook a certain topic or lays greater emphasis on any given topic. Second, culture-based instruction envisages information about the organization of any material or topic. For instance, by locating parts of a book during class might help the learner to reduce the cognitive load of the task and provide ample opportunities to share the new information in small groups and reflect on the practice of any given activity. (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). Moreover, by engaging learners with literary texts, some cultural contrasts help learners gain cultural recognition; therefore, learners learn to appreciate and foster tolerance over other cultures.

The relationship between literary theory and a reader's personal worldview is delineated in the reading process itself since language learners steadily interact with the text in order to arrive at an understanding (Bressler, 2007: 10). Moreover, in *The Reader, The Text, the Poem* (1978) by Louise M. Rosenblatt, the transactional relationship between the reader and the text is revealed as well.

A reader brings to the text his or her past experience and present personality. Under magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, the reader marshals his or her resources and crystallizes out from the staff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he / she sees as the poem. This becomes the part of the ongoing stream of the reader's life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him or her as a human being (Rosenblatt, 1978: 12).

Therefore, a piece of literature would be a great tool to facilitate cultural learning, raise awareness about other cultures, break down stereotypes, foster tolerance and understanding. Cook (2000) stress the importance of literature as it enables the language learner to be involved in the reading process in an autonomous and individualized way and offers a rich array of materials as well as being widely-appealing for reading. Furthermore; literature provides a good basis on which an ESL / EFL language content syllabus could be based. Literary works of art is also always readily available. Teachers and critics sometimes consider incorporating literature into the classroom as difficult because of a misconception which regards literature a special subject which only experts could comprehend. In contrast, literature serves as a means to an end in language learning contexts as writers are trying to communicate with ordinary readers (Marsh & Peck, 2001).

2. Culture and Raising Cultural Awareness in an ESL / EFL Context

The term culture has been defined by many scholars. Tyler (1924) defines culture as a complex term which includes beliefs, knowledge, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habitual actions acquired by individuals living in the society. On the other hand, Goodenough (1957: 167) defines culture as socially acquired knowledge, which includes both "know-how" and also "know-that." Moreover, Condon (1973: 4) contends that culture is "a system of integrated patterns, most of which remain below the threshold of consciousness, yet all of which govern human behavior just as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions".

Regardless of the numerous definitions of the term, raising learners' cultural awareness is one of the pivotal considerations in an ESL / EFL context. Bennett et. al. (2003) indicate that the person learning a language without learning its culture has a stake in becoming a fool. As far as the content of the culture to be processed within an ESL / EFL context is concerned, the impact of culture is obvious on two aspects: on *lexical level* and on *discourse level*. In teaching of lexical cultural items, language teachers consider a variety of cultural features as a variety of cultural elements are inherently embodied within these words and phrases. For instance, some different lexical meanings can be reflected differently in different cultures in that these words could have been influenced by a certain political system, custom, habit or religion. Moreover, some words may be unique to a certain culture and they may be manifested by different words and meanings based on the classification of mentality of that culture. In addition, the meanings of certain words may be reflected differently depending on the mentality of the culture. On the other hand, raising learners' cultural awareness on discourse level involves the selection of topics which could invite learners to appreciate social implication in a given text. Besides, through code selecting, learners have access for the observation of variation and style in discourse. Last, as different pieces of discourse manifest coherence, manners and other features in varying ways, learners may classify cultural items and engage with the values, beliefs and traditions of foreign cultures (Yang, 2010: 178).

Promoting learners' reading for pleasure has been advocated by various authors in the field (Bamford & Day, 1997; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983: 85-86; Wallace, 1992: 68-69) as this will pave the way for language learners to get a sense of 'intertextuality.' This term involves the fact that one text includes particular traces of other texts, and often they cannot be readily interpreted without relating them to other texts (Wallace, 1992: 47). Therefore, extensive reading fosters language learners' cognitive maps to an extent that they can observe some elements which they could not have otherwise. McCarthy and Carter (1994: 114) maintain 'many common, everyday texts assume that the receiver will be able to pick up ... allusions and perceive the cultural references [to deep rooted common cultural stories of allusions, sayings, idioms etc].'

Thus, it is obvious that the new information picked up from the texts and the realization of cultural elements existing in any discourse could be long-lasting provided extensive reading is fostered within ESL / EFL contexts. Sinclair (1990: 16) confirms this view by suggesting that 'in general people forget the actual language but remember the message.' Therefore, the textual memory not only fosters the retention of comprehension but also enhances the grasping of cultural elements and enjoyment of discourse. Learners can discern the native readers' contributions to the discourse; namely schemata.

3. Putting Theory into Practice: Teaching 'Never Let me Go' by Ishiguro in accordance with the principles of Schema Theory

The Pre-reading Phase

The pre-reading phase aims to activate learners' background knowledge and provide them with the reading experience to contribute to their understanding of the target material. For this reason, at the very first stage, learners are provided with the information which states that *Never Let Me Go* is a dystopian novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, which was also filmed in 2010. First, the visuals of the film are presented; following on that, the trailer of the movie is presented in order to arouse and foster learners' interest to read the novel. After that, the target vocabulary is presented in order to reduce the cognitive load such as 'to donate organs' 'to get a deferral' etc. Teacher pays careful attention to writing down lexis on the board. Next, the teacher delivers a chart including some questions in columns in order to involve learners in making associations. *The questions on the chart are as follows:*

- What does the front cover show us about what we might visualize in the story?

- Do you have any information about the author's background? Has he written any other stories like this?
- What can we predict about the story based on the title? What are your predictions?
- How do you think one can learn about life? By being involved in informal situations or learn by doing?
- How do people denote organs in your country? Is it common to donate organs?
- Why do you think people take art classes? Do they help individuals?

This activity is presented in small groups or pairs depending on the size of the class. This will bring about meaningful discussions and/or debates. Following the discussions, the teacher gets response from the groups in turn and organizes a 'graphic organizer' on the board, which shows how concepts are related to each other. Following this activity, learners read page 1 and write about what the story might be about. Then, they exchange their papers and find out each other's predictions.

The While-Reading Phase

During while-reading phase, the aim is to create a learning environment in which learners can recognize the culture represented in the novel. For this, the teacher has to set clear goals so that exposing learners to different culture/cultures may prove to be prolific. The key to future lies in guiding our learners to respect and embrace diversity rather than fear and reject differences. Although the story might look dreadful at times, it is of crucial importance for learners to assimilate valuable information and make culture learning appealing since their beliefs and attitudes will extend beyond the boundaries of their immediate environment thanks to the novel. In addition, they will be able to cultivate an understanding of those unique features represented in a parallel world.

Chapters 1-3

Firstly, the teacher arouses interest by giving some facts from the first three chapters by presenting some statements about 'the parallel world' in the novel. Learners work in pairs and decide if these statements are true or false. If false, they are expected to correct these statements.

a) TRUE / FALSE ACTIVITY is presented.

- Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are brought up within their families. T / F
- Tommy is a kind boy; however, he has bad temper. T / F
- Kathy believes that the fact that Tommy threw up his arm, knocked her hand aside and hit the side of Kathy's face was intentional. T / F
- At Hailsham, the boarding school, Kathy and all students have some form of medical almost every week. T / F
- Tommy apologizes to Kathy for hurting her. T / F
- Learners make some paintings, drawings, pottery and all sorts of sculptures to earn money. T / F
- If somebody is good at creating, she/ he is respected at Hailsham. T / F
- Everybody laughed at Tommy when he painted an elephant and this discouraged him. T / F
- Ruth has excellent social intelligence, and often perceives realities that others miss. T / F

- b) Teacher inquires learners by presenting questions about the general culture and the cross-cultural elements in the novel.
- What is the hierarchy of authority at Hailsham? Is this similar to the school you attend?
 - What are the rights and responsibilities of students at Hailsham? What are their roles?
 - To what extent do individuals possess knowledge about their futures?

Chapters 4-6

- a) Learners complete the sentences.

-Kathy explains that she looks forward to becoming a donor because _____.

-The students begin to resent Madame for taking their best artwork away to the gallery as _____.

- b) Agree / Disagree activity is presented

Learners are presented some statements showing some opinions about the 3 chapters and they are expected to fill in the 'WHY' section under each statement. Learners work in groups of four and then 2 students leave their group and they change partners to compare their ideas. This activity could also be presented at the pre-reading phase to let learners predict the content.

_____ Ishiguro's alternate England suffers from all kinds of material shortages, a situation that both parallels and helps to explain the organ donation system. 'WHY?'

_____ Miss Emily's lectures always bewilder; 'WHY?' [she frequently becomes emotional and alludes to concepts the students do not understand.]

_____ Kathy states that "There are some very good reasons why we can't tell you where it came from" 'WHY?' [to show that she understood that Ruth was lying about the pencil case.] '

_____ Ruth tries to find the tape by Bridgewater, and when that fails, gives Kathy another one 'WHY?' [in order to compensate for what she did with the aim of consoling Kathy.]

- c) Students do a matching activity in pairs to discuss the roles as part of the culture in the book.

1. The language Miss Emily uses has no effect on children because_____.
2. The students at Hailsham do not wish to get more information about donations because_____.
3. Language use is important at Hailsham because _____.
4. The insults at Hailsham like smoking are overtly penalized because _____.
 - a. they sense that they are not ready for the whole truth.
 - b. Hailsham plays a special role in this brave new world and tries to foster the willful ignorance of students.
 - c. students' social roles are determined by what the authorities say.
 - d. they do not understand abstract concepts.

Chapters 7-10

Learners in this part are presented a double-entry journal to state their explanations for the importance of some quotations taken from the novel, to make personal connections and state their interpretations within groups.

Quotes from Chapter 7-10	Explanation of Importance, Personal Connection, Agreements/Disagreements, Interpretations
<p>*"The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say...You'll be leaving Hailsham before long, and it's not so far off, the day you'll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. You need to remember that. If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you." <i>Miss Lucy (64- 65)</i></p> <p>*"None of us stopped to think about how she felt, Miss Lucy herself. We never worried if she'd got into trouble, saying what she did to us. We were so selfish back then." <i>Tommy (70)</i></p> <p>*"You're upset because I've managed to move on, make new friends. Some of the veterans hardly remember your name, and who can blame them? You never talk to anyone unless they're Hailsham. But you can't expect me to hold your hand the whole time. We've been here nearly two months now." <i>Ruth (96)</i></p>	<p><i>Learners' remarks...</i></p>

This section covers the end of Part One and the beginning of Part Two. In their conversations, the characters often tend to refrain from talking about their feelings and the substance of the exchange is lies unsaid. Therefore, the teacher inquires the groups about interpersonal relationships in terms of culture.

- Do girls work and interact with the boys at the Cottages? Is it proper?
 - How are insults expressed?
 - Are soothing/mitigating forms used among the characters?
- Chapters 11-14

The teacher asks some questions about the culture in 'Never Let me Go', particularly in terms of discipline and decorum.

- Chrissie and Rodney ask about a rumor they've heard--that Hailsham students are allowed to apply for deferrals before beginning their donations if they are "really, properly in love" (153). Who has authority over whom? To what extent can one person's will be imposed on another based on this quotation?
- Do means of control vary with recognized states in the life cycle of the trio, or according to the setting or offense?
- When Ruth rebels by saying "We all know it. We're modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos...If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter." Who or what is considered responsible is a character has a breakdown? The person? The parents? Older companions? School? Society? Environment? Or is no blame ascribed?

Chapters 15-17

What is a deferral? Tommy's dwelling on the deferral program is *obvious*. The art in Madame's gallery, he believes, "reveals our souls" (176). So quickly jot down their ideas about this program and its effect on Kathy, Tommy and Ruth on one piece of paper and pass it into one another. Next, the predictions are read aloud as a whole class activity.

- TRUE/FALSE ACTIVITY (Follow-up)
 - Kathy is almost pathologically passive and unable to make decisions. T / F
 - When Ruth learns about Tommy's drawings and his plans to use them to defer his donations, she does not care at all. T / F
 - Kathy decides to leave the Cottages and begin her training to become a carer after a bad discussion with Ruth. T / F

Chapters 18-20

Learners summarize the main point and any major details in the margin on their books in pairs. (Pencils should be used to make corrections easier.) Learners are encouraged to write these notes in their own words as much as possible to make sure they understand the concepts being presented.

Example: *Kathy begins ignore the trivial concerns of her childhood and adolescence and focus on the donations waiting ahead of her and Tommy.*

The teacher also asks questions about expectations and aspirations in the novel as follows: To what extent is it possible or proper for an individual to express future goals? Are any potential roles available within the community which can provide personal fulfillment and satisfaction?

Chapters 21-23

The teacher presents a situation from Chapters 21-23 and learners do a role play activity and actively engage themselves with the text: *Kathy and Tommy go to Littlehampton to find Madame. They see her in town and follow her to her home.*

Learners, then, talk about what images are forming in their minds and make predictions as to what the end of the novel might explain. They write dialogues. The teacher inquires learners about authority in the text. What beliefs are held regarding 'luck' and 'fate'?

Next, learners check their understanding by keeping an "internal summary" of ideas. This can be done as: "This chapter explained the causes of _____. The most common cause is _____."

The Post-reading Phase

Learners are expected to write reviews about these topics to finalize the study of the novel. Before they start their reviews, they work in groups and note down some ideas before they start writing their drafts. It serves as a free writing stage. *These questions include:*

- What did you think of Never Let Me Go? Did you enjoy it?
- How do you react to the narrator, Kathy? Do you appreciate the way she handles her situation?
- Why do you think Ishiguro reveals the plot and the circumstances of his story gradually?
- How do the friendships the Hailsham pupils formed at school affect them throughout their lives? What role does friendship play in Never Let Me Go?

- What does Hailsham represent to Kathy? Why does she want to seek out her childhood friends years after she has left school?
- What do you think *Never Let Me Go* is saying about the value of human life?
- What do you think of the parallel world that Ishiguro has created, a world set in the late 1990s but distinctly different from our actual world?
- How does reading about this parallel world make you feel? Why is that?
- Miss Lucy believes that the students should be given full information about their futures as soon as possible, while Miss Emily believes it is better to withhold this knowledge. Which of these views is correct?
- According to the novel? What is a decent life? Compare/contrast the lives of students at Hailsham with your life during your own childhood.

Finally, when he/she finishes reading a book at the end of the reading classes, they are expected to write a book review. This paper might include the answers to one of the stated questions above. Prior to writing their papers, learners are divided into discussion groups to jot down ideas. The portfolio is a great tool not only to track the books they have read, but to show improvement through the year in one of their productive skill, namely writing. Therefore, the reading process is prolific in that it leads to improving learners' writing skills as well.

Conclusion

The teaching of reading has traditionally involved bringing a target text into the classroom and assigning learners comprehension questions to cover the material. However, in contemporary practice, a reading class is usually divided into three parts, namely the pre-reading phase, the while-reading phase and the post-reading phase all of which have their own aims and procedures. The three-phase approach illustrated above need not be conducted strictly for every reading. However, the process could be productive under certain circumstances as it is in harmony with the principles of the schema theory. The reading procedure suggested by this contemporary approach will pave the way for activating learners' background knowledge, providing them with the skills and strategies needed to become efficient, independent and effective readers. Coming into realization that there exists another world in literature, learners also break down stereotypes, compare their values with others' and improve their interpersonal skills as they are involved in a series of cultural learning instances. Cultural factors are also critically relevant to overall evaluation of learner achievement, teacher performance and program effectiveness. As language teachers, keeping track of cultural developments, values and customs and also incorporating these with a plurality of rich classroom practices are hoped to renew and improve our teaching. They key principle is flexibility; teachers should avoid using the same exercises repeatedly in order to refrain from classroom routines.

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