

## Language Skills through Literature for ESL Learners – A Contextual Approach

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**Abstract:** There is a conviction that grammar lessons and writing exercises in modern pedagogy should teach the English language. English language teaching (ELT) is not just confined to grammar and exercises. It involves various techniques and methodologies to nurture learners to acquire language skills, especially for English as a second language (ESL) learners. Though practical grammar provides application of the concept, contextual and cultural inputs will be missing. The teacher needs to involve the learner in a contextual way to learn the language. For this, lessons from literature make the best option. Short stories, poems, essays, articles, and excerpts from one-act plays can provide a strong literary base for language learning. The learner will understand the language's beauty and application in the contextual setting. However, the teacher needs to match the language and literature to make the learner apply the skills. The present paper makes an analytical study of the key teaching – learning aspects of language learning through select literature-based topics with suitable references and examples.

**Keywords:** ELT, ESL, Literature, language skills, contextual approach

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## Introduction

Literature is a great source of knowledgeable content mirroring realistic characters and contexts. It is appropriate to adopt scholastic works for the present generation to analyse. It would be great exposure to go through short stories, poems, dramas, and fiction written by world-famous authors. Huge wisdom lies in these amazing works. Miss. Jumana AL Hatmi, a lecturer of English at the Preparatory Studies Centre – University of Technology and Applied Sciences, mentions that “Teaching literature and poetry always has a way of appealing to the emotions and minds of the students. By using it in the classroom, students will not only be able to learn new vocabulary and expressions, but also learn the culture of the language and its people. Novels, poems and stories provide a rich context for discussion, critical thinking and problem solving. This approach will also teach students that learning outside the classroom is possible and enjoyable. By reading these texts, young minds will shape their characters and build their personality apart from learning language skills.

## Language skills through Short stories

Short stories depict the content in a terse manner yet represent the wholesomeness in the narration. Writers like O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, R.K. Narayan, and many others have penned exuberant stories with great literary style, using apt literary devices. Somerset Maugham reflects social realism and projects upheavals in human life. The human conflict is well portrayed in his characters. He uses irony and suitable vocabulary with his typical language style. He uses idiomatic phrases extravagantly to enthrall the readers. The readers are greatly impressed with his narrative technique. This is the peculiarity of Maugham. His narrative technique flows smoothly and establishes a direct association between the reader and the read. (Chellaiah, 2021)

His short story ‘The Lotus Eater’ was presented in a captivating narrative style. The language and syntax give readers lasting impressions. The conversations appear to be realistic. In the story, the author narrates the story in the first person. He meets Thomas Wilson, a nature lover who leaves his job and settles on the island of Capri. Finally, he dies on the island after suffering financial troubles and debts. The following dialogues from the story reflect day-to-day enquiries. Students can learn conversation skills by reading the text.

*"How long have you been here?" I asked.*

*"Fifteen years." He glanced at the blue and placid sea, and a strangely tender smile hovered on his thin lips. "I fell in love with the place at first sight. You've heard, I dare say, of the mythical German who came here on the Naples boat just for lunch and a look at the Blue Grotto and stayed forty years;*

*You were a bank manager, were you?" I asked.*

*"Yes. I was manager of the Crawford Street branch of the York and City. It was convenient for me because I lived up Hendon way. I could get from door to door in thirty-seven minutes."*

*"An annuity for twenty-five years?" "That's right." "Have you never regretted?"*

*"Never. I've had my money's worth already. And I've got ten years more. Don't you think after twenty-five years of perfect happiness one ought to be satisfied to call it a day?" "Perhaps."*

The students can also be described using apt vocabulary. "It was a peasant's cottage, well away from the town, in a vineyard, with a view of the sea. By the side of the door grew a great oleander in full flower. There were only two small rooms, a tiny kitchen, and a lean-to in which firewood could be kept. The bedroom was furnished like a monk's cell, but the sitting-room, smelling agreeably of tobacco, was comfortable enough, with two large armchairs that he had brought from England, a large roll-top desk, a collage piano, and crowded bookshelves. On the walls were framed engravings of pictures by G. F. Walls and Lord Leighlon." The author describes Wilson at his first acquaintance - "The get-up was picturesque, and very suitable to the place and the weather, but it did not at all go with his face. It was a lined, long face, deeply sunburned, thin-lipped, with small grey eyes rather close together and light, neat features. The grey hair was carefully brushed. It was not a plain face, indeed in his youth Wilson might have been good-looking, but a prim one. He wore the blue shirt, open at the neck, and the grey canvas trousers, not as though they belonged to him, but as though, shipwrecked in his pyjamas, he had been fitted out with odd garments by compassionate strangers." (p...) and the expressions like 'Sun, like the top of an orange, was dipping into a wine-red sea' make the reader visualise the scene.

Burt writes: "Maugham's watch words were simplicity, lucidity and euphony in that order;(p 37). He creates a direct association between the reader and the read. Brander observes: "He has natural aptitude for dialogue, and the best passages in his novels are little scenes which might have been from the stage" (P 6). The story ends on a sad note that Wilson dies by the side of his favourite nature spot under a full moon. It leaves a deep emotional impact on the readers.

**Table 1: Idiomatic Expression in the story – The Lotus Eater**

| Sl. No. | Idiomatic expression in the Lotus Eater | Meanings                                                          |
|---------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.      | round peg in a square hole              | a person in a situation unsuited to their abilities or character. |
| 2.      | tittle- little                          | gossip or foolish chatter                                         |
| 3.      | once in a blue moon                     | very rarely                                                       |
| 4.      | sounds pretty rotten                    | very unpleasant and poor quality                                  |
| 5.      | hanky-panky                             | improper and dubious behavior                                     |

Here, the ESL learners can acquire language skills through his simple and lucid style. Moreover, his dialogues are witty, and he avoids tedious and difficult tracks in reaching his primary goal of enjoyment. (Chellaiah, 2021)

## Language skills through Poems

Poems are beautiful verses of expression in a rhythmic pattern. The use of rhyming and thematic verses helps the reader understand the author's point of view. Poems are a powerful tool of literature to present a strong theme or message. The poems by John Keats, P.B.Shelly, W.Wordsworth, R.Tagore, and Robert Frost are still considered great poems. The poem 'The Brook' by Alfred Lord Tennyson is a fine example of learning language skills such as pronunciation and vocabulary for ESL learners. The lesson's objectives are to appreciate language, learn new vocabulary, key words and nature conservation. The poem was presented in the free flow style with rhythmic rhyming, with a message that nature is eternal: "For men may come and men may go, but I go on forever.. ' The Brook flows despite many turns and twists.

"I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance .... With many a curve my banks I fret...

I chatter over stony ways...I bubble into eddying bays ...I babble on the pebble"

Here, the poet mentions the different ways of sound expression by the river. The students will learn this vocabulary of sound expressions.

**Table 1:** Sound Expressions by the Brook River & Meanings

| Sl. No. | Sound Expression | Meaning            |
|---------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1       | bicker           | argue              |
| 2       | chatter          | talk, gossip       |
| 3       | babble           | murmur, jabber     |
| 4       | fret             | fuss, worry        |
| 5       | murmur           | fum, mumble        |
| 6       | Loiter           | stroll             |
| 7       | Trebles          | high-pitched sound |
| 8       | Bubble           | gurgle             |

ESL pedagogy through poetry can bring great benefits to pronunciation. Students learn pronunciation skills when teachers rhythmically recite the poem. "This is an example of how to use a popular poem to engage students and improve pronunciation using old-fashioned but effective drilling" (Penston, 2018, Para. 1). "Poems are written to be read aloud and usually have a rhythm that can be shown and enjoyed" (Penston, 2018, Para. 2). Suppose that students suffer from some problems with pronunciation, here the teacher might write them on either the board, or any prominent place so that all students can see them, then the teacher reads loudly, while students repeat after him. "Deal with two or three serious mispronunciations on the board, showing any relevant phonetic factors" (Penston, 2018, Para. 14). Table 2 shows the rhyming words used in the poem. Students will be exposed to these rhythmic words and learn pronunciation of minimal pairs by reciting the poem.

**Table 2: Rhyming words – The Brook**

| Sl. No. | Rhyming words       |
|---------|---------------------|
| 1.      | Hern – fern         |
| 2       | sally – valley      |
| 3       | glance – dance      |
| 4       | ridges –bridges     |
| 5       | flow – go           |
| 6       | river-ever          |
| 7       | ways – bays         |
| 8       | trebles –pebbles    |
| 9       | fret –set           |
| 10      | fallow – mallow     |
| 11      | swallows – shallows |
| 12      | sailing – grayling  |
| 13      | flake – break       |
| 14      | travel – gravel     |

*Table 2 Source: The Brook, poem by A.Tennyson*

Depending on the lesson, poetry is a great way to show ESL students that English isn't just about function. It's also about expression. Poetry is a great authentic material to encourage students to express themselves, learn pronunciation or vocabulary, and formulate opinions on a variety of discussion topics (Dore, 2022, Para.2). Through poetry teaching, pronunciation skills will be developed by reciting poems by teachers and students. According to Ramirez, "To aid with pronunciation, teachers can record their voices and send the recording through applications educators use to communicate with parents like Class Dojo or Remind" (Ramirez-Espinola, 2023, Para. 10). Students become enthusiastic to learn English in poetry classes as they are rhythmic. Moreover, the poems are terse and focus on a single theme, which can provoke positive thoughts about

nature and society. (Sherly, 2021, Para. 1). The phrase 'Men may come and men may go, but I go on forever....' will create an alarming message that nature is permanent and men are not immortal.

Literature, poems in particular, have multiple benefits for ESL learners. Apart from developing beautiful vocabulary and accent, love of literacy can be widely increased. It is the hour of the day.

### Teaching Essay for Language Development

Francis Bacon is a scholastic essayist of the Renaissance; apart from that, he is a great philosopher and presented the Essays on all walks of life with depth of wisdom. His writing style is not pretentious elegance but reflects the reality of life. According to Kiernan (1985), "The essays of Bacon have distinguished characteristics. His essays have various features such as the formation of argument, the structure of sentences and so on. Bacon used to write such a concise, epigrammatic, utilitarian, useful, logical and illustrative style." His literary genius was crafted in his Essays by the sense of precision and clarity. He maintained this style with powerful logical arguments, which made him a legendary writer.

Walker (1915) says that Bacon's essays abound in wit and intellectual genius; the style became more eloquent, and the phrasing became pithy. His aphoristic style reflects the tightness as well as flexibility of the writing. By reading Bacon's Essays, ESL

students will be exposed to such styles. Literature is a platform for unique styles and diverse vocabulary and expressions. Abram (2005) defines an aphorism as a concise, pithy, gentle and pointed statement of a serious maxim, idea, and general truth. It is a style characterised by direct, straightforward, and pithy language. The essay "Of Studies" depicts the essence of studies and learning. It was written in the impressive aphoristic style. The essay "Of Studies" will catch and show their satisfaction not only with the words of Bacon but also with his composition. Vickers (1968).

*Studies serve for Delight, for Ornament, and for Ability. (Line 1.)*

*To spend too much Time in Studies, is Sloth; To use them for Ornament, is Affectation; To make Judgment wholly by their Rules is the Humour of a Scholler. (Lines 8-12.)*

*Crafty men condemn Studies; Simple Men admire them; and Wise Men Use them. (Lines 16-17.)*

Here, Bacon cautions that too much study makes a person confused and inactive. Though books are a great source of knowledge and intellectuality, they may leave a person lethargic. Bacon emphasises that wise men use them. Common people simply admire reading books, and crafty men or cunning people may dislike reading books, as they do not want to accept others' wisdom. This aphoristic style can teach students that a point should be dealt with from different angles. He utters that man is a social and economic creature as well. One should be active in society and apply one's knowledge for the welfare of society. (Sultan, 1984)

*"Read not to contradict and invalidate, nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider."* (Of Studies) lines 20-23. In this quote, Bacon emphasises that a reader should not read books for contradictions or illogical arguments. He suggests that the reader has to analyse what he/she reads rather than simply believing in the content. Reading is a great boon for gaining knowledge, and it empowers a person in tackling tasks. One shouldn't use reading to insult or put somebody down. Reading provides wisdom to make considerations and to make assessments. Bacon says that a reader should not read to speak impressively or to show talkative skills.

Bacon's essays designate the classic puns of the English language, having an elegant touch of literary style. Bacon's essays contain the artistic value of goodness. His essays represent the well-set and skilful utilisation of language. Bacon took many Idioms and phrases from Latin and used them in his language. The sentences used in his essays could have functioned as larger paragraphs. This means that he had mastery of clarifying words and phrases from maximum to minimum. According to Jerry (1985), Bacon, through his incentivised and provoked style, can refine, guide and satisfy all the readers. His essays have a grasp on the readers, and their achievements are because of their style. As Singh (2007) states about Bacon's style, "Definitely Bacon was a writer which has used a unique style of writing. His style is transparent, straightforward, finery, outspread, equalities, antithesis, and enhances trifle themes such as truth and integrity." In this paper, the writing style of Bacon has been analysed in his four essential essays, such as (Of Studies, Of Revenge, Of Ambition, and Marriage and

Single Life). These essays are a great source of knowledge and literary genius. These literary texts should be assigned to English learners to develop their skills.

To conclude my discussion, Francis Bacon is a well-known and crucial figure in English literature with a writing style that is prominent and useful. Bacon's strong vocabulary, multiple quotations, clear sentences, incredible paragraphs, clarity, precision, and so on could make his style much more efficient and effective. Therefore, Bacon's essays are "a handbook" of practical wisdom extended with principles that are beneficial for worldly wisdom and success.

### Conclusion

Language acquisition through literature is a highly scholastic option. Literature has vast resources with literary values and language concepts. Perhaps one piece of great literary work is sufficient for lifetime learning. The paper presented different genres of literature to learn language. The present-day generation needs scholastic works written by great authors, and it is the role of the teachers to extract language skills from these valuable works.

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