

# The Synergy between literature in English and Language Learning in Higher Education: Review of Literature in practice

Bazimaziki Gabriel

Lecturer of Literature, University of Rwanda, Department of Humanities and Language Education, P.O Box 55 Rwamagana – Rwanda

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**Abstract**— *The interface between literature and language is a topic explored in this essay by looking at language as a tool of communication and literature as a tool to enrich language skills. Literature is concerned with artistic use of language to depict the socio- cultural, political and economic situations of human beings in the world they live. In higher education, literature in English is taught not only to equip learners with ethical values, critical thinking and analytical skills but also communication skills in English. In this paper, theories of using literature in language learning are reviewed with specific interest in English as an international language. The paper anchored on two of Lazar’s approaches such as language - based approach to using literature in language learning on the one hand, and literature as a tool for personal enrichment on the other hand. Discussion reveals that literature is an indispensable tool to enrich language knowledge and proficiency if well utilized. Teachers of Literature should consider that it is a means to enrich the acquirer’s language knowledge and proficiency.*

**Keywords**— *English language, literature in English, higher education, Language knowledge, proficiency, critical thinking, reading, writing.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The interface between literature and language has been an interesting topic for linguists and literary critics over the years, probably because one is an invaluable tool to another. Generally, language is a tool of communication of thoughts, feelings and emotions while literature is concerned with artistic use of language to depict the socio - cultural, political and economic situations of human beings in the world they live. Many literary genres, including without limitation to nonfiction rhetorical speeches mainly performed more orally rather than are written (Burke, 2014), can be a root of language skills development, particularly speaking which can be achieved through practice. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the teaching of literature intends to make a learner not only a critic but also conversant with language. In higher education in particular, literature in English is taught not only to equip learners with ethical values, critical thinking and analytical

skills, but also communication skills in English (Bazimaziki, 2019). It is a means to enrich the acquirers’ knowledge and proficiency in English language since, in the view of Burke (2014), it is concerned with imitation of the work of others; and practice in writing; a strategy involving (i) knowledge, followed by (ii) analysis, followed by (iii) production and a series of creative writing, reading and speaking activities intended to enhance learners’ use of language and become proficient in it. According to Hemings et al. (2016), the teaching of English [ particularly as a second language], in schools, colleges and higher education is similarly characterised by fostering students’ capacity for critical engagement with texts and for the appreciation of nuance and complexity in texts in a variety of contexts, including their historical contexts. Literature in English is doubtlessly a good ground to reach this end as Jurnam et al. (2010) and Bahadur (2018) posit that literary texts are playing

significant roles and have become the most important source of valuable authentic materials of language teaching program.

## II. AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to examine how literature plays a crucial part in language education with particular interest in higher education. It is a theoretical literature review seeking to answer the following questions: (1) what is literature concerned with? (2) To what extent does teaching literature in English enrich learners' knowledge and proficiency in English? The paper hinges on two of Lazar's (1993) approaches such as language-based approach to using literature in language learning on the one hand and Literature as a tool for personal language enrichment where students are by far engaged on the other hand. The two theories are in agreement that literature plays an invaluable role in language learning process. The first approach views literature as an important resource which stimulates language activities including without limitation to discussion. Hence, this view concludes that language knowledge can be improved when literature is integrated in language classroom. The second approach considers literature as a tool for personal language enrichment through creative activities. Besides the two approaches, the present paper takes much consideration into Richa's (2017) description of English as an important language perceived everywhere as a global Lingua Franca, global language for E-communication and Education, a dominant business language, an international tourism language and the internet language, social media or Multi-media industry language among other things.

## III. METHOD

The methodology used in this paper is basically analysis based on discussion of theories of linguistic gurus and critics interested in the integration of literature and language education. The discussion is conducted in tandem with the two questions on which the study is framed. Further, discussion in this paper relies heavily on essentialist position about the role of literature in ELT classrooms, as well discussed in Bahadur (2018) supporting the argument that the study of literature can facilitate the development of students' L2 language by promoting critical thinking and their motivation in a classroom. Taken together, the paper is led by qualitative analysis.

## IV. DISCUSSION

In this century, knowing English and being proficient in it is a key that opens doors to many life domains where both oral and written types of communication take the lead. Hewings et al. (2016) assert that English language has won a fertile ground as an international lingua-franca internationally prioritized and politically involved in the Non-anglophone Schools' curricula.

Teaching literature in higher education must side with Nicolls (2002) who suggests that it is important for the lecturer to consider the topic to teach, list the expected knowledge, concepts and skills that students are expected to know and identify the connections between expectations of knowledge and the new knowledge he/she hopes to develop for the students. In this context, the question of developing students' language skills through literature session holds a big room here. In this section, two questions are taken into consideration. The first question is about what literature entails and at what it aims. The second question is concerned with how literature plays a part in the enrichment of knowledge and proficiency of language, specifically English language because it has become a global language, a language of instruction in many education systems, a multipurpose language in many human life domains in many parts of the globe.

Ordinarily, literature deals with all about human life; a way of life of people and the environment around them. People's life experience being the main concern of literature, the latter is a discipline concerned with the past, present and future of human beings depicted through genres of fiction and non-fiction including without limitation to narrative stories, poems and songs, plays, proverbs and other short formulaic oral genres which convey messages about how man copes with the ills and mores of life. Cultural values, customs and beliefs, political and economic issues, conflicts of cultures, human inter and intra- conflicts are among other things that authors are interested to discuss using language as a medium of communication.

By depicting society, the language used by authors of different genres can in turn be an important occasion for the audience to improve it in one way or another as many critics contend. For instance, Chouhan (2016) and Khatib et al. (2011) concur on the utmost role of literature in the ground of language learning, particularly the four language skills viz reading, writing, listening and speaking besides areas such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

According to Khatib et al. (2011), reading literature creates opportunities for students to develop the reading speed. When literature learners freely reflect on the events, and having them critically comment [which is of course literary analysis or criticism], is facilitative for advancing speaking proficiency. The same authors assert that when students are doing creative activities like writing, completing or summarizing a literary work, they are developing writing proficiency. As the authors contend, when exposed to an audio-visual literary extract, students are likely to ape the native speaker's accent. They concluded that literature is by and large a tool that can accelerate language learning. Of course, this is greatly influenced by factors such as teachers' motivation to learners and students' will and self determination to engage more efforts in their learning. One will eventually find that students who are interested in literary subjects, by reading and writing literature - poems, short stories and comment on other authors, develop more rapidly their knowledge and proficiency. Their language vocabulary grows and their writing style is likely to be influenced by authors that they are familiar with. Thus, reading and writing activities (creative activities) in literature session are by and large two facilitative factors for language enhancement. Cameron (2013) put it clear that

the belief that creative writing cannot serve practical language learning purposes, and the implicit belief that creative and expressive use of language is of little importance to language learners, are invalid. By providing opportunities to focus on form in a meaningful manner, and opportunities to investigate and use more difficult vocabulary and more impactful forms of expression, creative writing tasks can contribute to central challenges in language learning (p.17).

This is cemented by Nicolls (2002) referring to teaching as far more than providing information and checking/testing to see if it has been acquired by the students. According to him, teaching consists of creating situations in which students actively participate in activities - such as discussion, group work and problem solving, which enable them to enhance conceptual change and individual construction. It is believed that everyone's involvement with literary genres educates them not only about people's life in the worlds that surround them but also about language use, about acts of language

such as irony, hyperbole, metaphor and rhetoric. In similar perspective, Chambers et al.(2006) report that literature undoubtedly encompasses novels, poems and other genres which engage students to work explicitly on the development of basic human capacities such as language, reason, imagination, introspection, moral and ethical deliberation, sociability, aesthetic responsiveness, physical embodiment and so on: capacities that are fundamental to self-understanding in relation to others. Thus, if stories, poems and plays are included by the English language teacher, says Chouhan (2016), students may take more interest in class and can therefore learn better English, an idea also pinpointed in Pishol et al. (2015) saying that the use of literature - graphic novel for example, and the multi-literacies approach in their reading class positively engage learners and make them enjoy the lesson, thus leading to positive outcomes. This point is well supported in Stefanova et al.(2017) saying that the great potential of working with a literary text in the English classroom fosters critical thinking skills and helps students' grasp the foreign language as well. Reading and writing are two skills that most often developed in tandem as well confirmed in Iida (2013:9)

The use of literature enables students to develop L2 linguistic knowledge and language awareness, communicative competence, cultural knowledge of the target language, critical thinking skills, helps their level motivation, and provides them with emotional engagement. In particular, L2 literary writing provides students with opportunities to express their own thoughts about different subjects and the world, and to negotiate and construct meaning by placing their own perspectives or emotional states at the centre in their writing processes.

Thus, literature can help learners to improve their language proficiency. When reading and analyzing literary texts helps students improve the way they express an idea in that language. In quite similar view, Chambers et al (2006) discuss the principle of participation in literature classes as a source of good performance in language learning and report that literature lectures, classes, seminars, workshops, tutorials [...] engage students where they study literary texts and movements, theoretical and critical works, performances and so forth, analyse and discuss them with their teachers. In this context, by this exercise teachers are trying to help students become better at expressing their ideas and feelings verbally, in writing, creatively. Zengin et al.(2019) are of the

same view by showing that learners English language can develop as a result of integrating literature in English to English language teaching; a position supported in Bobkina et al.(2016) based on Working with literary texts in the English classroom. The authors believe that literary texts used conveniently contribute considerably not only to learning a foreign language but also to inspiring critical thinking, which is inherent to a critical reading of a fictional work. The point made here converges with McIlroy(2013) reporting that poetry and creative texts are potential for language teaching and learning hence they should not be absent from language curricula.

Taken all in all, while effective language skills learning largely depends on the concept of 'practice makes perfect', literature teaching coheres with this context of four language skills in that intensive reading activity, followed by textual analysis (writing) that will be presented orally (speaking) before the class for discussion (listening and speaking) can eventually improve learners level of language knowledge and proficiency.

## V. LIMITATIONS

There are huge findings and discussions regarding the role that literature plays in EFL sessions. As such, one of the constraints in this review essay was about choosing what to take and what to leave out in a single paper involving analysis based on collected documents rather than information collected from respondents. Another limitation to this paper is concerned with lack of space for non-essentialist position concerned with the touchdowns of literature to ESL classroom.

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Literature and language are predominantly two interlinked subjects. Language is well learnt when it is integrated in other subjects. Literature is one of these subjects which engage learners and enable them to interact, think critically and develop various language skills. By and large, this paper confirms that literature in English has a positive impact on language teaching. It is an important tool to enrich language knowledge. The discussion of literatures related to language learning posits that learners of literature in English can become proficient in that language as they learn by doing, thus practising language skills through literature class. In higher education, the key factor is what is taught, how and why it is taught; meaning that the facilitator has to aim for effective teaching reflected by successfully achieving

intended learning outcomes. For discussion in this paper reflected on linguists and literary critics' views, a qualitative study using data collected from population sample in higher education is recommended to examine whether these theories are consistent with what takes place on the practice ground.

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