

The Effect of Reading and Teaching Literary Texts on the Vocabulary Range and Composition Length Development: A Case Study of Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

The effect of reading and teaching literary texts on the development of productive skills of language learners has long been an eye-catching factor for researchers. Having determined the interest through analysis, the present study seeks to search the effect of literary texts on the enhancement of vocabulary usage and composition length of the EFL learners. To achieve the above-mentioned desire, a case study was designed, including the population of 15 intermediate EFL. The case was chosen from the language learners of the Velayat University of Iranshahr. They were supposed to read and discuss a literary text, the effect of which on their writing was later compared to a previously prepared composition, before the exposure of the literary text. A focus on the vocabulary range and composition length along with the progression of their ideas in writing revealed that literary text and the discussion session were highly influential on the above-mentioned features. They used more lexical resources from the literary text in their composition along with a longer and more comprehensive text in terms of progression.

Keywords

Literary Texts; Writing; Vocabulary Range; Composition Length; Progression.

1. Introduction

As a production skill, the utmost importance of writing cannot be neglected as long as communication is the concern. Writing can be seen in everyday deeds of people, be it in a formal and informal letter and email writing or the vast application of writing in world communication like newspapers, magazines, books, texting, etc. This, in a similar view, can be applied to the EFL students as well. When they gain knowledge about the essence of language learning and their need for English, they need to express themselves and their student identity through writing, namely the presentation of assignments, tests, and opinions.

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However, it has been observed and proven, through numerous studies (Balantukang 2013; Batchelor 2012; Cave 2018; Schwebs 2019), that the role of literature is always highlighted in the thinking and learning processes of individuals if they desire to be good communicators. In addition, while in the Iranian community of language learners and students the dominant trend is speaking, it can be determined that language learning has done much less in the realm of writing. Therefore, with foci points of literature and writing, the present study forms a bridge between the literary idea development, and further, the presentation of that in form of written compositions. Before that, and with all the above-mentioned ideas in mind, the following concepts and understandings forge the framework of our research.

2. Review of the Relevant Literature

For the certification of writing importance, Hosseini et al. (2013) accentuate the importance of writing through a chain of research done by Spivey (*Discourse Synthesis* 1984; “Transforming Texts...” 1990; *The Constructivist Metaphor* 1997). In writing essay tasks, students use a meaning-making process that involves organizing ideas of what they understand from the passages, selecting from texts, and integrating ideas based on inferences from them. Then in writing, they use cohesion markers to make connections within and across texts to communicate their ideas while writing (Hosseini et al. 2013). Having devoted their attention to the interconnectivity of writing and score development in exams, they revealed a positive connection between content provision and their writing skill. However, their focus was mainly on the application of writing for exams and the fact that writing must be dealt with if better performance is desired.

When used on a larger scale, should the students write something about a topic of study in the classroom, a set of research showed it can be mixed with reading to provide better comprehension (Blanchard 1988; Konopak et. Al. 1990; Armani 1994). Students are too eager to understand and experience the craft and techniques of an author, and to later use them in their writings, because it acts as a modeling procedure in which students follow the writer’s craft in their writing (Butler and Turbill 1987; Skolnick 1989). The access and joy gained from reading literature can enhance and stimulate thought processes in learners and mostly, as it was specifically bolstered by Armani (1994), in children.

Additionally, idea generation and the expansion of ideas in forms of support and critical thinking can be enhanced if students are exposed to enough literature in the forms of reading and listening (Juel 1988). Correspondingly, this exposure seems to be beneficial following the vocabulary acquisition as the learners use them to an acceptable extent in their compositions (Elley 1989). For the fact that learners may as well learn different genre, descriptive language, and story elements, “students need to be provided

with many opportunities to use reading and writing within the context of their learning experiences” (qtd. in Brown and Briggs 1987, 279). Admittedly, all the reviewed literature lacks an important concept of critical thinking. Although students may have enough exposure to the literary contexts provided in form of reading and listening sources, they may only implement the phrases and expressions as well as the concepts through an imitative approach, having a mixture of memorized phrases.

To fill the gap, researchers like Naber (2011), Qassem (2020), and Ekholm (2020) probe three significant concepts of “reflective writing in line with critical thinking”, “rethinking and developing authentic styles”, and how ethically they follow “subjectification” to form their own unique texts, respectively. Naber, based on Paul’s model of critical thinking, defines critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (Paul and Scriven “Defining Critical Thinking,” 1987). Whereas Naber mentioned in his reviews the application of Short, in-class writing assignments, portfolios, and free-writes were numerous ways of applying writing in the critical thinking, he further applied the idea of reflective writing as a more crucial practice of writing development. Additionally, having his focus on nursing students, he interpreted that the role of critical thinking in writing is prominent in case of in-detailed questioning, which allows a better composition provision.

Believing that literature exposes students to master varieties of writing styles, Qassem (2020) in “EFL Students’ Perception of the Role of Teaching Novels in Enhancing Writing Skills” probed the inadequacy of language-structure-based usage of literature in development of the authentic styles of writing. Through the application of novels and short stories for undergraduates, he mentioned that the authentic literature can give the students the ability of critical thinking, which in return promotes stylistic writing in forms of skilled sentence and paragraph writing. However, there still remains the questions of whether or not the students try to imitate the styles.

Finally, Ekholm (2020) states that the need of literature and the critical thinking provided should be in line with individual performance of the students. This, by far means that not only should the literature be applied as a mode for students to develop critical thinking and stylistic writing, but also, they should have an ethical perspective of what they are writing away from any imitation and plagiarism. The ending result, as Ekholm (2020) mentions as a way to be used when teaching literature for the sake of writing is that “the work of fiction is understood not as text, but as utterance; not as something written, but as writing; perhaps even, not in terms of object(ification), but of subject(ification)?” (“Reading and Teaching Literature as Writing,” 11-12).

What still remains as a gap in the reviewed literature is the application of that authentic self-developed style to the composition writing. To shed more light on that, it is the concern of understanding whether or not students can lengthen their ideas with the newly-developed style to use the words learnt in the literary texts appropriately. Their responsiveness along with vocabulary use, borrowed from literature, have a crucial effect on making their composition appropriately detailed. Therefore, the present study is designed to assess the above-mentioned ideas through the reading process, as it provides enough grammatical range and lexical resources.

3. Main Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions,

Is there any relationship between the usage of literary text and writing vocabulary-range development? If yes, how can it be determined?

Can language learners feel informed enough so that they can extend the length of their compositions after reading a related literary work on a topic?

4. Methodology

The design, goal, participants, procedure, methods of data collection, and elaboration are discussed in this section.

4.1. Design

Through a qualitative study, a mixed-gender class of Iranian EFL learners has been selected from among the university students in Iranshahr. The students had an intermediate language level of proficiency. Learners were asked to complete a writing assignment prior to any treatment which was collected for analysis. Later through the treatment of exposure, they gained knowledge about some literary texts in line with the topic they had. For the sake of critical thinking, and with the aid of a teacher, they have expressed their ideas on the topic in terms of personal points of view and analysis of other students' comprehensions. Afterward, a topic of writing with the same focus on the previous topic was given to the students, assuring that the question was different in style and format but had the same topic as the main view for writing. The recorded data have been analyzed qualitatively.

4.2. Goals

The researchers wanted to demonstrate whether or not a congruency could be seen in the development of critical thinking and the length of the composition students provided after and before the treatment. From another perspective, a symptom of inclination was probed in the students' performance to certify they tend to use more words in their compositions after being exposed to literary texts.

4.3. Participants

The study included observations of an EFL class of the senior students in the Velayat university of Iranshahr. The class was a mixed-gender class of 15 intermediate language proficiency students in which the number of male and female students was 7 and 8, respectively.

4.4. Procedure

The students in the selected class were asked to write a composition on the topic of “Some believe that personal independence can be as much important as the role of an individual in the society. What do you think the effect of these factors can be when a person wants to be a successful performer during his/her life?” The compositions of whom are gathered to be analyzed qualitatively with a thick description. Afterwards, students were demanded to read the eleventh chapter of a literary work named “Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters” by Ralph Waldo Emerson which is a series of lectures provided on the positivity of life and the life well-spent. The students were motivated to gain a perfect understanding of the words of the text along with the joy they can have when reading the text.

After a two-week-long interval, students were asked to discuss and share their understandings of the text in the class and to elaborate more on the possibilities for the sake of critical thinking. The teacher also aided students to look at the literary text from various perspectives for a better, more comprehensive understanding of the text. Finally, students were asked to write about; “Some people believe that personal liberty is just as important as one’s social standing. What impact do you think these factors have on a person’s ambition to be a successful performer for the rest of his or her life?” The next session, without any annotation that the topic is somehow like the previous one. The papers were gathered for later qualitative analysis and comparison.

4.5. Data Collection and Analysis

While the nature of the present research is qualitative, the main tool of data collection was the compositions written by the students. The researchers gathered two sets of written compositions in the form of pre-task and post-task. The first one was a text which students had written before exposure to the literary text. The second one was the manifestation of the student’s performance after the treatment. In addition, the analysis happened following some criteria known to be important for the researchers. The elements included the extension of ideas, reflection of the knowledge of style, lexical resources, and ease of comprehension.

Both sets of writings were analyzed with thick descriptions. Comparisons were made of the quality improvement of the above-mentioned features before and after the students’ exposure to the literary text. Examples were also included for each feature, enhancing and certifying the development of the students’ writing performances. The data provided are listed as a table for each individual and are later analyzed descriptively to assess the overall performance of the class as a case.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of the present study can be best determined through an exemplification of how the performance of the students changed prior to and after the treatment of exposure to the literary text. Shown as a comparison, a description of how students expand their vocabulary usage in the post-task and its length is provided.

5.1. Extension of Ideas

During the treatment in which students had to present their ideas about the understanding of the literary text, they were scaffolded to finally reach a full understanding of the ideas in and beyond the text, and as well were aided to examine the text through various perspectives. Students have even been informed about the style and formality of the text as well as the writer's underlying belief when the text has been analyzed in a whole-group discussion task in the class.

The obtained results of the post-task of writing vividly certified an extended composition in comparison with the pre-task. Nearly 13 students yearned to write more and provided longer compositions due to the influence of the literary text. The results are provided in the table below. For ethics and anonymity, the real names of the participants were not used.

Students	Number of words in the pre-task	Number of words in the post-task
ST1	93	192
ST2	58	69
ST3	87	140
ST4	85	189
ST5	87	230
ST6	133	235
ST7	69	132
ST8	145	177
ST9	84	119
ST10	68	65
ST11	55	70
ST12	59	55
ST13	118	178
ST14	62	156
ST15	94	213

They were eagerly able to implement the ideas in the composition and the perspectives learned in group discussions in their compositions. The result of the case study verifies the usage of literary text for expansion of ideas and extension of text length was highly effective.

5.2. Reflection of the Progression and Position

The most outstanding job was, on the other hand, a specialized categorization and differentiation of the ideas. The probable scenario of lengthening the compositions by the students could have been repetition and redundancy of words, sentences, and concepts. What was observed, interestingly, was that students could professionally manage to take positions while they were writings. Varieties of ideas from the class group discussions were implemented in the text; however, the ideas were personalized and, even, sometimes expressed as ineffective by personal support and exemplification rooted in the point of view of the students. One instance is provided here for a better picture.

In her pre-task of about 187 words, ST3 provided support of how success is dependent on an individual's performance and hardworking:

If a person wants to be successful, he or she must be hardworking. Hardworking is important for everyone because they can get what they want. For example, if you want to be a famous piano player, you must practice hard. You can have your teacher, but this is not the only thing that can help you. Practicing is more important for you. So, it is important to practice alone.

While this paragraph may seem relevant and has a clear position (that solitude is an essential part of being successful), repetition and leap can be seen in the progression of the text. For instance, the two first sentences are repetitive and they both convey the same meaning. The example acts as a support which is not that much recommended as the statement does not have a set of supporting. Albeit, after the treatment, an unconscious progression is achieved as it is manifested in the post-task.

Humans tend to have their solitude and it can be believed to one of the most important aspects for success if they want to be connected to the others. Human beings try to learn skills and practice them when they are alone. The result can be a successful sense that we have when we practice the art first in ourselves and then we want the others to enjoy and be affected by our practiced skills. For example, as Napoleon said, we can do anything by our own hands, either by doing it alone or by learning it from the others and then practicing it. He says that he can construct anything in a battle by himself and can teach the others as well. Therefore, success can be seen in our personal development and our contributions to the society (Solitude and society, p268).

It can be perceived that the progression of the text is far better than the previous text and the ideas are well-developed. The alteration is already clear as the student is affected by the text provided, which is the reason why even the example is now related to the text. The student now has an overlapping view of society and solitude. On the same wavelength, there is no tangible leap in the development and progression of the ideas, as they are built carefully on each other to support the main idea. The ideas are borrowed and paraphrased from these two paragraphs of the main literary text:

“These are arts to be thankful for, — each one as it is a new direction of human power. We cannot choose but respect them. Our civilization is made up of a million contributions of this kind. For success, to be sure we esteem it a test in other people, since we do first in ourselves.” (Solitude and society, p270).

“‘There is nothing in war’, said Napoleon, ‘which I cannot do by my own hands. If there is nobody to make gunpowder, I can manufacture it. The gun-carriages I know how to construct. If it is necessary to make cannons at the forge, I can make them. The details of working them in battle, if it is necessary to teach, I shall teach them. In administration, it is I alone who have arranged the finances, as you know.’” (Solitude and society, p268).

5.3. Lexical Resources

Yet another important aspect under observation was the implementation of appropriate lexical resources in the post-task. It was perceived that apart from the 14 percent of the usage of inappropriate words borrowed from the literary text, the extent of the appropriate words used in the post-task improved crucially. Students manifested a perfect knowledge of topic-related vocabulary improvement which were borrowed either from the text or the synonyms provided during the elaboration and group discussion session.

Considering our previous example, it is vividly clear that some of the words used by ST3 are borrowed from the text. For instance, the words “art” (as with the same meaning of skill), “solitude”, “contribution”, “construct”, and “battle” are all borrowed from the excerpts provided. An additional example can be the collection words student 15 provided in his second writing which is listed in the table below.

Students	From the literary text	From in class elaborations and discussions
ST15	Urging Incessant affirmatives the flood of happiness prosperity tenderness fresh and manifold claims overstimulating metaphysic constitution impressionability contribution	Sole In good spirits Independence Ruthlessly Approach

The average number of words used by the students from the text and in-class elaborations and discussions was about 11. To sum, the literary text was influentially important for the perception of appropriate meanings of the word in the exposure provided.

5.4. Ease of Comprehension

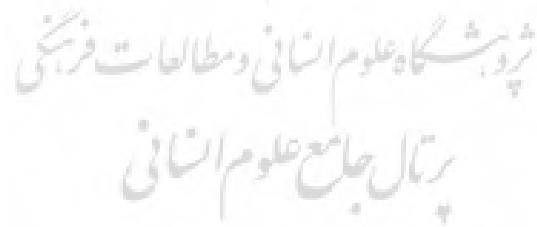
The participants of the study not only had a great performance on the range of vocabulary and the length of the proposition, but the elaboration session also enhanced their power of maintaining the position in the text. One of the main concerns was whether or not this extension can affect the clarity of their output in the post-task. It was perceived that while students could manage to have more ideas and a detailed explanation of those ideas in mind, the way they extended their supports and clarifications resulted in a better sense of connection to the text and, as a result, ease of comprehension. Even the appropriate topic-related word usage enhanced the quality of the text, which in return, acted as another important factor for ease of understanding.

6. Conclusion

The result of the present study verified an extension of ideas and lexical resources when upper-intermediate EFL learners are exposed to a literary text. It was observed and understood that literary texts can act both as a vocabulary input and a mediator for idea development. Students can internalize the words more easily and use them accordingly due to a tie with the sensation they get from the literary text. This, indeed, also influences

the progression of their writing as long as their ability to maintain their position through the text. Their compositions are perfectly comprehensible, even more, in comparison to their previously written composition on a similar topic.

The implications of the study can be primarily beneficial for teachers, instructors and learners. From an interdisciplinary perspective, in both realms of Literary Studies and Applied Linguistics, the increased knowledge of vocabulary results probably in a better comprehension and production. Learners, even if they intent to delve deep down into the vast ocean of literature, possibly need to have a great mastery of the language and meaning which is mostly conveyed through vocabulary. Therefore, proper instruction during senior university courses may catalyze their performance later to have a broadened understanding of the literary texts. On the other hand, the literature in itself is a booster for learners to intermingle and interconnect form and meaning of words for a better comprehension. As a positive outcome, the deeper the understanding and perception, the higher the feasibility of negotiation and production. Thus, learners can lengthen their ideas in their productions as well if they are asked to comment, analyze, or criticize a literary work in detail. Last but not least, the researchers can step into finding further correlations between language learning and literary studies, utilizing commonalities like vocabulary perception.



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