

Literary Texts: An Essential Tool for the Development and Learning of Foreign Languages

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Received : 02-05-2024

Accepted : 30-09-2024

Abstract :

This article focuses on the pivotal role of literature in general, and literary texts in particular, in the enrichment and acquisition of foreign languages. Literature manifests its influence through various mediums, such as literary texts and fables, which serve as outstanding pedagogical tools for teaching moral values and encouraging children to develop their creativity, vocabulary, and communication skills. This, in turn, enables learners to better understand both the structure and vocabulary of the language. Additionally, fables are often written in an allegorical style, which aids learners in grasping the meanings of words and expressions that might otherwise be difficult to comprehend. They also play a vital role in fostering children's imagination, intelligence, and creativity while imparting universal values that contribute to the development of sociocultural competencies.

Keywords: literary texts, language learning, development, foreign languages.

A Brief Overview of Literature

"A linguistic chain, spoken or written, forming a communicative unit."

Defining literature is a challenging task. According to Culler (1997), all attempts to define literature have proven partial and therefore of limited utility: the best of what has been thought and said, language removed from its context, language organized in a specific way that distinguishes it from other uses, or language used to create a fictional world. None of these definitions is close to being adequate or useful, as none exclusively refers to literary language.

Literature encompasses works recognized for their aesthetic value, including novels, poems, plays, as well as stories and legends. As Aron and Viala point out, literature is a space where "all forms and all uses of language intersect" (Aron & Viala, 2005, p.3). Literature is not merely a collection of sentences and paragraphs animated by characters advancing a narrative to convey an idea. It is also an informative and educational source, infused with elements of creativity. Thus, the existence of a work as "literature" depends on its differential quality.

Literature is inseparable from the act of writing; literary creation and its realization come together to form a text. It transcends the mere transmission of ideas, relying on how the writer employs expressions, words, and phrases to construct the text and on the aesthetic appeal of its various structures. In other words, form and style are two critical components in the construction of a literary work and the creation of a literary fact.

"The existence of a fact as a literary fact depends on its differential quality. What is considered 'literary' in one era might be regarded as a linguistic phenomenon in another, depending on the literary system within which it is situated. Since social life correlates primarily with literature through its verbal aspect (...), this correlation between the literary series and the social series is established through linguistic activity. Literature assumes a verbal function in relation to social life." (Tynianov, 1965, p.132, cited by C. Achour & Rezzoug, p.92).

From Tynianov's perspective, literary texts can be regarded as linguistic productions. This underscores the close relationship between literature, literary production, texts, and language. It prompts us to question how literature, in general, and literary texts, in particular, contribute to the enrichment and learning of languages.

Learning Through Literature

"Language creates literature, and literature sustains language."

Literature plays a significant role in education by fostering a linguistic, cultural, and intellectual environment for learners, enriching their knowledge. Reuter highlights that teaching literature aims to: "develop analytical thinking, enhance reading and writing skills, expand literary knowledge, and build the student's cultural background" (Reuter, 1998; 1999, p.191).

Literature contributes to knowledge development, allowing learners to explore texts and become familiar with their contexts, thereby enhancing analytical and critical thinking skills. This dual engagement with reading and writing enables learners to expand their vocabulary, improve their reflection skills, and produce coherent and structured written works.

Furthermore, literature offers learners a logical and philosophical perspective that aids in understanding the world. It cultivates cultural richness and openness to the world, sparking curiosity and fostering creativity. Regarding the role of literary texts as cultural and intercultural vehicles, L. Colles affirms: "The literary text serves as a lens that illuminates, fragmentarily, a cultural model. The multiplicity of these perspectives allows us to gradually grasp the values around which this model is organized" (Colles, 1994, p.20).

Thus, literature positively influences language learning by enriching learners' cultural and intellectual competencies.

The Literary Text and Foreign Language Learning

The literary text has been described as “the best revealer of linguistic aspects.” Lhote emphasizes this by stating: “Learning a new language means learning to speak in a language different from one's own, but it also means learning to listen and understand in this new language” (Lhote, 1995, p.26).

Foreign language learning holds immense significance as it opens various horizons, enhances cognitive and mental abilities, and offers opportunities to explore diverse cultures worldwide. Additionally, it plays a crucial role in professional domains by increasing employment opportunities.

The ability to communicate with people of different linguistic backgrounds is one of the most vital aspects of humanity. When a person can converse with another in their native language, it is seen as a remarkable gift. Bilingual individuals enjoy a unique advantage, being able to interact with a broader group of people in both personal and professional contexts. Mastery of a language instills a sense of belonging, no matter where one resides, figuratively opening up the world. This competence facilitates integration into different societies, fosters kindness in interactions, and helps forge lasting friendships. Even if one only considers these benefits, the fruits of language learning can be enjoyed for many years.

Language learning also reshapes one's worldview, as every language embodies its unique style, expressions, culture, and heritage. For instance, children learning new languages acquire diverse vocabularies and ideas, enabling them to perceive the world in new ways.

Learning a foreign language is more than an academic endeavor; it is a personal and cultural adventure. It enriches one's perspective on the world, opens new horizons, and promotes the development of intercultural competence. Each language learned becomes a tool for navigating the complexity and richness of humanity.

According to J. Courtillon, “Learning a foreign language means learning a new culture, ways of living, attitudes, ways of thinking, a new and different logic. It is entering a mysterious world at first, understanding individual behaviors, and increasing one's capital of universal knowledge and information, as well as one's personal level of understanding” (Courtillon, 1984, p.52).

Foreign language learning transcends linguistic frameworks (grammatical and lexical skills). It entails exploring the culture, values, traditions, and thoughts that the language conveys. Cuq and Gruca highlight that the literary text is “a privileged space where interculturality unfolds” (Cuq & Gruca, 2005, p.413).

This process of learning broadens one's perspective on the world by fostering a deeper understanding of others' motivations and emotions. As Gómez Palacios (2001) asserts, narratives have served as a heritage of transmitting knowledge and values throughout human history.

Through the diverse knowledge gained, learners expand their intellectual horizons, leading to a better understanding of themselves and their identity. In this context, literature is no longer a mere repository of texts for translation but, as Bamidele (2009, p.16) observes, “an experience through which students attempt to make sense of their lives while building both an individual and collective identity.” (Sonia Rut Badenas Roig, 2018).

Overview of the Fable

A fable is a literary genre, characterized as a short narrative written in prose or verse, typically featuring animals and intended to convey a moral lesson. Michèle Aquin and Georges Molinié define the fable as: “an allegorical narrative apologue, most often featuring animals, accompanied by a moral lesson” (Aquin, 1999, p.68).

The fable’s brevity and clarity make it a direct and engaging literary form, recognized for its simple and accessible style. As Jean de La Fontaine noted: “I use animals to instruct men” (1998, p.08). In fables, animal characters symbolize the virtues and flaws of human beings. Françoise Theuret-Rullier elaborates: “The lion always represents power and grandeur; the wolf symbolizes cruelty, wild strength, and stupidity, as opposed to the lion, who is stern yet noble; the fox represents cunning intelligence and craftiness; the dog symbolizes loyalty and goodness; while other animals embody the traits of courtiers” (Theuret-Rullier, 2006, p.89).

The Fable as an Effective Learning Tool

A fable is a literary narrative that uses animal or fictional characters to impart moral lessons or life teachings. These short, allegorical stories represent real-life ideas or situations through their characters and events. Though often written in verse, some fables are presented in prose.

Fables serve as a reliable medium for learning, educating both children and adults about reasoning and logic. Their texts reject misunderstandings and conflicts, criticize excesses of authority and inequality, and teach ethical values and life principles. Jean de La Fontaine summarized the dual essence of the fable: “The apologue consists of two parts: one may call one the body, the other the soul. The body is the fable; the soul, the morality.” This duality makes fables particularly useful in foreign language learning, serving as material for dialogue exercises and reading practice due to their simple and clear structure.

Fables are equally valuable for beginners in literature and textual analysis. They stimulate curiosity and intelligence through their moral teachings, connecting readers to universal human values. As Dandrey Patric observes: “The fabulist does not imitate reality but uses the most unrealistic artifice to suggest truths based on experience, educating children and enlightening adults while entertaining them” (Dandrey, 1991, p.14).

Researchers in psychology and education widely support the use of narrative methods to teach and nurture children, particularly during their formative years. This phase is critical for the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the child.

The Fable as a Crucial Tool for Personality Development in Children

Stories play a vital role in educating children by fostering awareness of the world around them. They enhance attention spans and strengthen mental abilities. A story can be described as a sequence of events and interactions between characters that create a shared emotional experience for both the reader and the story's heroes.

For example, the rich narratives of the prophets in the Qur'an highlight the importance of stories in shaping individual and child personalities. Children emotionally engage with story heroes, discovering new feelings and experiences otherwise unavailable early in life.

Stories also nurture creativity, as children often reenact scenes using the tones and voices they originally heard. Some children even adapt stories by renaming characters or adding events, showcasing their creative instincts.

The Fable's Role in Emotional and Affective Development

Reading stories helps children understand and articulate their feelings, as well as empathize with others. This fosters stronger family relationships, builds social connections, and improves communication skills. Consequently, it contributes to children's emotional maturity and social adaptation. Fables promote the development of emotional intelligence, enabling children to establish healthy relationships and adapt successfully to society.

The Fable's Role in Linguistic and Affective Development

Story reading is a vital tool for developing children's linguistic and expressive skills, both written and oral. It enriches their vocabulary, phrases, and ideas, while improving comprehension and concentration. This equips children to express their feelings and communicate their thoughts clearly and logically.

Conclusion

Il est indéniable qu'en dépit des avancées technologiques et de la diversification des supports d'apprentissage, la littérature, à travers ses textes littéraires et ses fables, demeure une source privilégiée pour l'acquisition des langues étrangères. Ces langues ouvrent la voie à la découverte de l'univers de l'Autre, facilitant la compréhension interculturelle et l'enrichissement personnel.

Dans ce contexte, J.-M. Defay souligne que : « la littérature — bien choisie, bien exploitée — apporte beaucoup à la motivation des apprenants et à leur compréhension de la culture-cible, car, dans le meilleur des cas, elle touche à la fois à l'universel et au particulier et établit ainsi un pont entre le connu et l'inconnu dans l'apprentissage, comme entre le savoir et le ressenti. »

Ainsi, pour atteindre ces objectifs, les textes littéraires, avec leur richesse stylistique et culturelle, restent des outils fiables et efficaces pour apprendre une langue étrangère et se connecter au monde.

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