

# A HOLISTIC APPROACH IN TEACHING LITERATURE AS A TOOL IN NURTURING LEARNERS

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## Abstract

This study emanated from a study that examined the views of ESL teachers on the impact of the study of literature on Grade 11 and 12 learners' academic writing in the Khomas region of Namibia. Data was gathered through a questionnaire that consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. There was a general consensus among participants on the significance of literature in general language proficiency. Nevertheless, some of the respondents in the study indicated that they struggled with teaching literature to their Grade 11 and 12 learners. The reasons provided were a lack of literature material, teacher education that did not prepare them well in teaching literature, lack of inservice training focusing on this component and lack of interest from the learners. The study was anchored on the learner centred approach which in turn falls under the umbrella of communicative learning theory, an approach for language learning and teaching in Namibia. The premise of this paper is to suggest ways in which literature can be effectively integrated in ESL classrooms. The article suggests that literature should be taught in a holistic manner using an integrated method that can prompt Namibian learners to think critically, thus reaping the full benefits of their learning experiences in studying literature in an ESL classroom.

**Keywords:** Literature, integrated approach, learner centred approach, ESL

## 1.0 Background of the use of literature in Namibian Senior Secondary Schools

Literature in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms in Namibia involves the teaching of prose; novels, short stories, drama and poetry. The Ministry of Education and Culture (1993, p. 53) states that one of the strategic initiatives of the Ministry after independence in 1990 was a new Senior Secondary Level Programme leading to the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and for some, to the Higher International General Certificate of Secondary Education (HIGCSE). The Ministry aimed to assist learners to communicate effectively in both spoken and written English. To complement this initiative, two syllabi were designed; one for IGCSE learners and the other for HIGCSE learners. The HIGCSE syllabus contained a component of literature use in ESL, while the IGCSE syllabus did not contain this component.

This syllabus was then revised in 2006, and a new ESL syllabus was introduced to address the shortcomings of the previous one. The new ESL syllabus for National Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) is divided into two levels: the higher level and the ordinary level.

The ordinary level syllabus does not include literature as part of learning content for the learners. According to the Ministry of Education (2005), the higher level is classified into four components: listening and speaking, reading, writing, language usage and literature. The

literature component is then divided into three categories: (a) skills that the learners should acquire, (b) the objectives of studying literature and (c) the competencies that the learners should have acquired at the end of the course. A critical analysis of the HIGCSE syllabus reveals that, through the skills, objectives and competencies of the literature component, Higher Level learners are encouraged to become critical thinkers, readers and writers. Table 1 illustrates the skills, objectives and competencies that the learners should obtain from studying literature.

**Table 1: Skills, objectives and competencies of the literature component as outlined in the syllabus:**

Skills	Objectives Learners will:	Competencies Learners should be able To:
1. Knowledge with understanding	Acquire knowledge and understanding of different texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recall and narrate events in the texts studied</li> <li>• Provide details of settings and summaries of plots, themes and characters</li> <li>• Explain literal meanings in texts</li> <li>• Select details relevant to the tasks set and use quotations appropriately</li> <li>• Understand intentions of the writer</li> </ul>
2. Critical interpretation	Critique and review texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distinguish different points of view</li> <li>• Work out various themes, imagery and symbolism in the texts studied</li> <li>• Provide analysis of plots, characters, etc.</li> <li>• Employ appropriate literary language in their critical analysis of texts studied, e.g., imagery, irony, sarcasm, satire, etc.</li> <li>• Identify relationship between characters and plot as well as characters themselves</li> </ul>
3. Judgement and personal response	Form and develop own ideas and opinions on aspects of the different genre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appraise texts studied</li> <li>• Communicate an informal, personal response to texts studied</li> <li>• Discuss relationships in texts studied</li> <li>• Articulate and discuss their own assumptions, feelings and attitudes</li> <li>• Compare and contrast themes, characters, etc.</li> <li>• Consider complicated issues</li> <li>• Show evidence of capacity for independent thought and judgement</li> </ul>

*Source:* Adapted from English Second Language syllabus higher Level Grade 11-12, (Republic of Namibia: Ministry of Education, 2010).

A close analysis of Table 1 shows three levels of the Bloom’s Taxonomy. In the first instance, language learners are supposed to remember and understand the storylines and literary elements within the literature texts, which is level 1 and 2 on the Taxonomy. In addition, for level 3 and 4 of the Taxonomy, the learners are supposed to critically analyse and interpret given texts. Finally, the learners are supposed to evaluate the texts and provide a personal response to the texts, which is level 5 of the Taxonomy.

## 2.0 Theoretical framework

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is anchored on learner-centred philosophy underscores the Namibian basic education curriculum. At independence, the educational system of the Government of the Republic of Namibia was shifted from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach. According to MEC (1993), teacher-centred education is unproductive, and thus the need to shift to learner-centred education.

Learner centred education views learning as an active process in which learners are encouraged to participate in learning. Language learners should be motivated to discuss literary texts in order to develop and improve their intellects. Learning is thus viewed as an active process in which learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts for themselves, hence the importance of encouraging discussion and critical thinking in a literature classroom. If used appropriately in Namibian ESL classrooms, this approach would enable ESL learners to practice skills in communication, knowledge sharing and critical thinking.

There are multiple benefits of encouraging discussions in the classroom. It should be kept in mind that Senior Secondary School learners are young adults who are generally eager to acquire and share information. This assertion is propounded by Reznitskaya, Anderson and Kuo (2007) who explain that participation in group discussion should be encouraged as it allows students to generalise and transfer knowledge gained from the classroom. It further builds a stronger foundation for communicating ideas orally. Discussion plays a vital role in increasing the ability of students to test their ideas, synthesise the ideas of others, and build deeper understanding of what they are learning. This approach shows that ESL learners could greatly benefit from its implementation as literary texts demand a deeper understanding of themes embedded in them.

Teachers in the study of literature in ESL classrooms are thus encouraged to allow their learners to hold large and small group discussions, which present learners with opportunities to exercise self-regulation, self-determination and a desire to persevere with literature tasks. In addition to this, these discussions would eventually increase learners' motivation, collaborative skills, and the ability to solve problems. Reznitskaya, Anderson and Kuo (2007) contend that if learners are accorded opportunities to discuss literary texts with one another and discuss their ideas in the English language, their ability to support their thinking, develop reasoning skills, and argue their opinions persuasively and respectfully would greatly improve.

The understanding of the learner centred approach should ideally help ESL teachers to encourage their learners to become constructors of their own experience and the teachers should create such an enabling learning environment. If the study of literature is made compulsory to all the learners, then they may all be able to attain skills that would enable them to actively participate in their own learning. They would share their inferences of the literary texts with their fellow learners and teachers. Generally, literature texts are open to various interpretations, as learners strive to grapple with these inferences they are thus encouraged to relate what they read to their socio-cultural environment. The contention by Yang and Wilson (2006) is congruent with the view of learner-centred teaching, an approach that is encouraged by the Namibian education sector. Here, learners are perceived as active participants in their own learning rather than passive recipients of information. With the necessary support from teachers, learners would ultimately become critical thinkers and not passive recipients of information. This statement is reinforced by the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) (2003) which argues that learner-centred education supposes that teachers have a holistic view of their learners; they should value the learners' life experiences as the point of departure for their studies. Teachers should be able to select content and methods on the basis of a shared

analysis of the learner's needs, use local and natural resources as an alternative or supplement to ready-made study materials, and thus develop their own and the learner's creativity. "A learner-centred-approach demands a high degree of learner participation, contribution and production... [It] is based on a democratic pedagogy, a methodology which promotes learning through understanding, and practice directed toward empowerment to shape conditions of one's life (National Institute for Educational Development (2003, p. 98).

### **3.0 The role of literature in an ESL classroom**

Hişmanoğlu (2005, p. 57) argues that "when selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students." The above factors would lead to the selection of texts that are appropriate for ESL students. Furthermore, the language teachers should also determine if the chosen texts are interesting and provocative, the texts should provoke strong positive reactions towards the content. The learners should be provoked to an extent that they will want to participate in class activities emanating from reading the text. According to Hişmanoğlu (2005), thought and emotion provoking texts and activities are more likely to have a long lasting impression on the learners' linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge.

The study of literature has a lot to offer to learners in general and ESL learners in particular. Shang (2006) explains why it is necessary to study literature in language learning. Firstly, the study of literature emphasises the exploration of themes more than any other school subject, and students are bound to learn more about how to express their thoughts through language. Shang (2006) further argues that through literature, students may enhance their vocabulary, grammar, paragraph structure and types and styles of writing. In addition to this, in so doing, students do not only learn to write effectively in the language classroom, but throughout their lives. Their language abilities and comprehension skills may thus be enhanced.

Abulhaija (as quoted in Shang, 2006) explains that language and literature cannot be separated because they have something important to offer in the development of a student as a whole. Literature teaches idiomatic language, improves comprehension skills and promotes writing skills, among others. The study of literature does not only help students to comprehend the meanings of given texts, but it also enhances the thinking and language abilities of learners. Furthermore, literature texts assist learners in learning vocabulary, discovering questions, evaluating evidence individually, forming judgements based on synthesis, and developing a coherent argument in support of a position. This, if encouraged in the language classroom can enhance the thinking and analytical skills of the learners. Koutsompou (2015) argues that the relationship between the study of literature and language learning and teaching is undeniable as language is the pillar on which literature stands. Without expression through language, literature would not exist. It goes without saying that literature can inspire learners of ESL to acquire a great deal of new vocabulary. It further helps them to expand their language awareness. This means that using the study of literature in an ESL classroom can help learners to become more sensitive to some of the overall features of the English language. Moreover, literature can be used to enhance learners' cultural awareness and help them grow on an intellectual level.

Shoebottom (2012) explains that educational researchers have found a strong correlation between reading and vocabulary knowledge. In other words, students who have a large vocabulary base are usually good readers. This is not very surprising, since one of the best ways to acquire a large vocabulary base is to read extensively, and if one reads extensively one

is likely to be or become a good reader. According to Katib, Rezaei and Derakhshan (2011, p. 203), vocabulary knowledge can be expanded through considerable exposure to literary texts which treat both formal and informal language. Reading these literary texts is a good exercise for enlarging the learners' vocabulary since many of these texts are replete with so many new words which can be beneficial to learners of ESL. In so doing Namibian Grade 11 and 12 ESL learners may be able to acquire vocabulary that may enhance their learning experience.

#### **4.0 Problems experienced by ESL teachers in teaching literature**

Teaching literature is a challenging task for ESL teachers in general, an endeavour that should be critically and creatively approached by those involved, especially the teachers.

Some respondents in the study explained that in most cases learners lacked interest in studying literature because the books prescribed used very difficult vocabulary, making the teachers unable to motivate their learners to be interested in these literary texts. As a result, they usually found it difficult to analyse the texts as they were required to. Understandably, a teacher would not want to use a text that is completely beyond his/her and his/her learners' intellectual capacity. This would ultimately be frustrating for everyone involved. However, the immediate difficulty with vocabulary in a text might not be an obstacle to its comprehension. Learners can be trained to infer the meaning of difficult words from context. The selection of a text therefore, should be given careful thought. Some respondents felt that they lacked experience in teaching the study of literature, thus making it difficult for them to help the students as they were expected to do.

A few respondents felt that a lack of guidelines for teachers on how to teach the study of literature was a stumbling block to the effective teaching of this component of language learning and development. In response to the above claims, there is a need for teachers to have a mentor, in the form of a senior teacher, who should guide and provide them with advice on how to go about teaching literary texts. Subject advisors are experts on different subjects in schools. They can also visit different schools and classes and provide the much-needed advice to the inexperienced teachers. This could alleviate some teaching problems that teachers encounter. In-service programmes can also be used as a platform to discuss and address such challenges.

Another challenge that was identified in teaching the study of literature was a lack of resources and books. Obviously, in this case both teachers and learners become demoralised and lose interest in taking the literature component seriously. However, teachers should be advised to go out of their comfort zones and acquire teaching and learning resources for themselves and their learners. In Namibia, Teachers Resource Centres (TRCs) are erected in all regions if not in each education circuit. These TRCs are equipped with most resources for teaching in Namibia. If teachers make time to visit these centres they probably would be able to find some teaching resources for their literature learners. Those that have access to the internet can acquire more resources from different educational links.

#### **5.0 The responsibility of the teacher in a literature classroom**

It is the language teacher's duty to create an enabling environment that can foster profound learning. Da Silva (2001, p. 171) proffers that "learning English as a Second Language is a discovery process, and the teacher figures an important character on this journey, for it is the instructor's task to make the learning process interesting, free from frustrations and inhibitions and above all, meaningful." Teachers of ESL should approach the reading materials in such a way that they encourage their learners to reflect on their own lives, learning and language experiences. This may allow learners to question, interpret, connect and explore



ideas as many literature texts are rich vestiges of ideas that learners may look at from different angles. Namibian language teachers should be made aware of the fact that they have a great responsibility of ensuring that their learners develop language skills that can enable them to negotiate various aspects of life in today's global and globalising world. Effective language skills, cultural knowledge and personal growth enrichment are the cornerstone of education especially in our globalising world.

Padmini (2009, p. 43) explains that the setback with some teachers is that they fail to discuss prescribed literary texts at different levels. They just read and interpret the texts. Padmini (2009) further argues that "this is a wrong method. Instead of reading what is said, or what happens to whom, for what reasons, where and when, literature should be used as a resource for teaching language." Literature should be used to engage learners in activities that can first and foremost improve as well as enhance their intellectual development, thus promoting learner-centeredness in the language classroom.

## **6.0 Approaches to teach literature in an ESL classroom**

There is no prescriptive approach of teaching literature; however, there are different methods that teachers of ESL can intergrate in their methodology to teaching literature. This article suggests three different models that can be incorporated in the teaching of literature in a Namibian ESL classroom. These models are: the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model. These are approaches according to Mustakim, Mustapha and Lebar (2014) have been intergrated into different approaches in teaching literature: the language based approach, paraphrastic approach, information-based approach, personal response approach, moral-philosophical approach and stylistic approach. However, for the purpose of this article only the three traditional models are discussed. Essentially, "Literature in Education is aimed at developing the potential of students in a holistic, balanced and integrated manner encompassing the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects in order to create a balanced and harmonious human being with high social standards" (Mustakim, Mustapha, & Lebar, 2014, p. 6). This paper advocates for the integration of the three models in teaching literature in ESL classrooms. The combination of these models will allow the language teacher to teach literature in a holistic manner.

### **6.1 The cultural model**

Koutsompou (2015) explains that the social, political, literary and historical contexts of a specific text are the main elements in the cultural model. Learners are required to gloss out the above issues and discuss them in their contexts. As literature is an epitome of different cultures, learners are made to understand different cultures from different parts of the world from which the texts they read were written and they should be encouraged to compare these cultures with their own. This model is an important aspect within today's globalised world as it gives learners an opportunity to understand some aspects of intercultural communication. It is imperative for Namibian learners to learn and understand the cultures of other people for the purpose of effective communication across cultures.

According to Koutsompou (2015), using the cultural model enables learners to understand the background of the texts presented to them— the history, society and politics of the context or country that is described in the text. Further, this understanding leads them to the appreciation of "ideologies, mentalities, traditions, feelings, and artistic forms within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows" (Koutsompou, 2015, p. 75). Corroborating this argument, Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan (2011, p. 202) argue that literature plays a significant role in cultural/ intercultural awareness and globalisation since now than ever,

the world calls for a universal understanding of cultures and the emphasis is put on universal needs and wants rather than individual needs. Therefore, it is befitting to use literature as a source of cultural awareness since literature encapsulates all the above elements, thus it can be used to understand cultural similarities and differences around the world. The study of literature thus teaches learners the ability to interpret discourse which can be applied inside as well as outside the learning situation and in literary and non-literary contexts. Since it is infused with real life language in different situations, literature can therefore provide a variety of models of communication.

### ***6.2 The language model***

In this model, the language teacher focuses on teaching language through literary texts. As argued earlier in this paper, without language, literary texts would not exist. Therefore, the aim of the teacher in this model is to bring the learners to understand how and why language is used the way it is used in different literary texts. This approach enables learners to gloss out the meaning of language as used by the authors and any other implications thereof. According to Savvidou (2004, p. 8), this model “enables learners to access a text in a systematic and methodical way in order to exemplify specific linguistic features e.g. literal and figurative language, direct and indirect speech”. In order to avoid mere focus on the linguistic goals, this approach can be applied in such a way that it allows learners to interact with the language used in the text in a way that deals with the literal and implied meanings of the language.

The themes within the texts can also be used for both creative and academic reading and writing. Academic conventions such as complexity, hedging, formality, objectivity, accuracy, organisation and planning can also be taught through literary texts. This model would in general assist the learners to “employ appropriate literary language in their critical analysis of the texts studied, e.g., imagery, irony, sarcasm, satire, etc.” (Republic of Namibia: Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 14).

### ***6.3 The personal growth model***

This model allows learners to interact with the text on a personal level. According to Savvidou (2004), it focusses on the particular use of language and placing it in a particular cultural context. Learners are given an opportunity to compare their experiences with those expressed in the text. Savvidou further explains that learners are encouraged to develop knowledge of ideas, language, content and formal schemata through different themes and topics. Therefore, language teachers should allow their learners to read and express their own opinions on any given text. In comparison with the stipulations of the NSSC (H) ESL syllabus, on the skill of judgement and personal response, the personal growth model would be best applied to achieve the competencies specified for this skill.

### ***6.4 The integrated model***

As can be seen from the discussion of the models above, each model focuses on specific skills. Therefore, the integration of these models in an ESL classroom would provide the learners with an enjoyable learning experience. As suggested by Yimwilai (2015), a combined model which comprises the main features of all the three models so that literature becomes accessible to the learners and most beneficial for their development as citizens of Namibia is most recommended.

## 7.0 Conclusion

It is therefore, the premise of this article that literary texts if selected conscientiously and taught with the aim of enhancing language learners' cross-cultural awareness through the cultural model, linguistic knowledge through the Language-Based model and critical thinking skills through the Personal growth model, ESL learners will graduate from high school with skills that might enable them to tackle the challenges of tertiary education and global issues that face our world today. Lucan (1981, as cited in Yimwilai, 2015, p. 15) submits that "the integrated approach is student-centred because it empowers students to make connections, generalize, and transfer knowledge to a variety of problem-solving situations in the real world." Literature in this way is seen as a threshold of building the character of our learners from a tripartite perspective. The texts that teachers select should appeal to the senses and emotions of the learners. Literary texts have the capacity and capability of moulding and nurturing learners socially, linguistically and on a personal level. Language, culture and critical thinking can be taught through well selected poems, drama, novels and short stories. Language teachers do not need to focus only on the language used in the texts as this may become frustrating to the learners especially if the language used is unfamiliar to them; hence, a call to language teachers to embrace and teach literature as a tool for building the character of the learner.

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