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# EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE





'Associate Professor, Ajman University, UAE. Email: <u>zakarny@hotmail.com</u> Tel: +971506499640 <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Nizwa, Oman. Email: <u>mahmoud.mohd@unizwa.edu.om</u> Tel: +96872207554



## **ABSTRACT**

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Controlled writing Critical thinking Cultural diversity Language acquisition Language learning Literary text Literature. In foreign language classrooms, the teaching of literature of imaginative works like fiction and drama, written in the English language, and the teaching of classics translated from Latin and Greek, were resurrected as an important component of teaching a language to second language learners. This is in recognition that literature plays a significant role in teaching English language in foreign language classrooms and its effects cannot be overemphasized. The present study reviews the literature on the effect of teaching the English language through literature. A brief history of English literature was explored followed by a review of literature as a source of material for teaching the English language. A review of previous research revealed that literature affects the teaching of the English language in many ways like promoting imagination, creativity and critical thinking; acting as a source of historical and important information; and facilitating cultural diversity. It was also revealed that it impacts information and knowledge by providing opportunities for developing listening, writing and speaking skills. In addition, literature also affects the teaching of English through controlled writing, and understanding the literary texts. This study contributes to the literature on second language acquisition by demonstrating the value and relevance of literature as a source of second language acquisition. It emphasizes the importance of integrating literature as useful material in teaching English as a second language.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature on foreign language acquisition by demonstrating the value and relevance of literature as a source of foreign language acquisition and the importance of integrating literature in learning a foreign language.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing need for learners to learn a second language, develop competences and skills, and communicate in a foreign language and adapt accordingly to changes in language for purposes of interacting globally, is influencing the teachers of a foreign language to consider all possible meaningful means of promoting language acquisition. Literature, largely defined as written material such as essays, poetry, novels, and other works of imagination characterized by themes of enduring or general interest, and by expression and excellence of style, is widely touted as one of these means to teaching the English Language. For some researchers, using literature in foreign language classrooms allows teachers of foreign language to use meaningful content to provoke learners' interest, provide them with an item that provokes conversation in the classroom and capture their imaginations

(Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012). For other researchers (e.g., Starja (2015)) certain forms of literature such as drama can help learners of foreign language to develop independent and critical thinking, and make contribution and express their opinions.

Supporting this view, Gönen (2018) held that literature materials such as poetry can serve as a tool for teaching a foreign language. Gönen (2018) further argued that poetry can help foreign language policymakers and teachers to bridge the gap between language teaching methodology and literature. According to Gönen (2018), poetry can help create language awareness and expand human experience in foreign language classrooms. For others (e.g., Cimermanova (2014)), literature materials (e.g., pictures, creative writing activities, and storytelling) are authentic, and effective in developing student writing skills. Evidence herein suggests that empirical studies on the importance of literature appear to have approached this subject from a limited angle either from the poetic or dramatic perspective, or story telling perspective (Cimermanova, 2014; Gönen, 2018; Starja, 2015).

There is a dearth of empirically tested studies that look at the holistic effect of literature in foreign language classrooms (Violetta-Irene, 2015). There are also very few studies on the effect of teaching English Language through literature with a view to demonstrate and emphasize the value of literature in foreign language classrooms. This paper fills this gap by highlighting features of literature and discusses the effects of literature on teaching the English language.

# 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

English literature dates back to 450 AD and its features vary from one literary period to another. In general, there are several English literature periods ranging from Old English period (Anglo-Saxon period (450-1066); the Middle English Period; Renaissance (1500-1660); Modern; and Post-modern period (Kataja, 2018). The Anglo-Saxon period was dominated by oral literature, including works of Cynewulf, Caedmon, and other poets. The Middle English period was dominated by pre-modern (recognizable English) characterized by secular and religious literature. Examples of literature during the Middle English period included Green Knight, Sir Gawain, and Piers Plowman and other works by Robert Henryson, Thomas Malory, and Chaucer (Blamires, 2020).

## 2.1. The Renaissance Period (1556-1625)

The renaissance period or early modern period had four parts: the Elizabethan Age; the Jacobean Age: the Caroline Age; and the Commonwealth Period. The Elizabethan period was characterized by English drama, with noteworthy figures as Sir Walter, William Shakespeare, Walter Raleigh, Edmund Spenser, Francis Bacon, and Christopher Marlowe. The Jacobean Age was largely defined by the King James translation of the religious book: The bible. The notable figures during the Caroline Age included George Herbert, Robert Burton and John Milton. This age covers the Corolus (i.e., the reign of Charles 1). The Commonwealth period covers the period between the Stuart monarchy restoration and the end of the Civil War in England. Oliver Cromwell was the key figure during the Commonwealth period. During this period, Oliver Cromwell closed the public theaters for about two decades to combat religious and moral transgressions and public assembly. Dominant literature included the political writings of Thomas Hobbes and John Milton. Prose writers such as Andrew Marvell, Abraham Cowley and Thomas Fuller published prolifically. Drama also suffered during this literary period.

## 2.2. The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century (1625-1789)

The 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century period, also known as neoclassical period, encompassed three ages: The Restoration Age; The Augustan Age, and The Age of Sensibility. The Restoration Age was marked by the response towards puritanical age in the theater. Comedies of manner (restoration comedies) were created under the playwright's talent such as John Dryden and William Congreve. Samuel Butler and other playwrights, including John Locke, John Bunyan and Aphra Behn introduced satire. Key figures during The Augustan Age, included

Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope. Prolific poet, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was known during this period for challenging female roles that were largely stereotyped. The Age of Sensitivity was dominated by figures, including James Boswell, Hester Lynch Thrale, Edmund Burke and Edward Gibbon. Ideas that were championed by many intellectuals during this age included the enlightenment, a critical and literary mode and neoclassicism. Novelists of this age, included Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and poets Thomas Percy and William Cowper.

## 2.3. The Romantic Period (1789-1832)

The romantic period spanned from the French Revolution to the Reform Bill (the Victorian Era). This era included works of well-known authors, poets, dramatists and novelists including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Beckford, Matthew Lewis, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charles Lamb, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, Anne Radcliffe, and Thomas De Quincey.

# 2.4. The Victorian Era (1832-1901)

The Victorian period had three phases: Pre-Raphaelites, Aestheticism and Decadence. It was the era of Queen Victoria. It was an era of great religious, social, economic and intellectual issues. The Reform Bill was passed during this period. Renowned poets in this period included Matthew Arnold, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning.

The essay form was advanced by Walter Pater, John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. Prose fiction was introduced during this period and made a mark under George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Samuel Butler, Anthony Trollope, William Makepeace Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell.

## 2.5. The Edwardian Period (1901-1914)

Named after King Edward VII, this period spanned the period between the death of Victoria and the start of World War I. The period included classic novelists, namely Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells and Rudyard Kipling. Notable dramatists included George Bernard Shaw, James Berrie and John Galsworthy while poets included William Butler Yeats and Alfred Noyes.

## 2.6. The Georgian Period (1910-1936)

This period included the reign of George V and four successive Georges. Georgian Poets, included John Masefield, Ralph Hodgson, W.H. Davies, Rupert Brooke, and John Masefield. The subject matter and themes were largely pastoral or rural in nature, treated traditionally and delicately by writers.

# 2.7. The Modern Period (1914-1944)

This period includes literary works written after World War I. Common features of this period included experimentation with the subject matter, form and style, drama, verse and narrative. Words by W.B. Yeats' "the center cannot hold, and Things fall apart"; are often referred to by scholars when describing the feeling of modernist or core tenant concerns. Notable writers included Novelists Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson and others. Poets of this time included W.H. Auden, Wilfred Owens, Robert Graves and Dylan Thomas. The dramatists included George Bernard Shaw, Caryl Churchill, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Frank McGuinness. Literary criticism was reinvigorated by William Empson, T S Eliot and Virginia Woolf.

## 2.8. The Postmodern Period (1945-)

The Postmodern period started during World War II in response to Modernism. The literary developments during this period included poststructuralist literary criticism and theory with writers such as Joseph Heller, Penelope M. Lively and others dominating this period (Chen, 2014).

It is worth noting that through this historical background of English literature, one develops a historical awareness that helps develop a motivation and interest among learners of a foreign language. Besides, it develops their cultural identity and provides a historical background of English literature and its usefulness by demonstrating how it has been used by others in the past to convey the richness of emotion and the depth of thought.

# 3. EFFECTS OF LITERATURE ON TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The effect of literature on teaching English language has been demonstrated in numerous studies. In general, the following key themes emerged from studies on the effect of literature on teaching the English language: imagination, creativity and critical thinking; cultural diversity; source of historical and important information; and information and knowledge. Other themes included linguistic opportunities; enhancing listening, writing and speaking skills; understanding controlled writing; enabling learners to develop the ability to handle expressive function; and developing learners' writing skills and understanding the literary texts.

## 3.1. Imagination, Creativity and Critical Thinking

Studies have suggested that teaching literature to language learners can help improve their creativity and facilitate them to develop critical thinking skills. According to Nguyen (2016) imagination and creativity are directly related to higher-order thinking skills and literature educates the imagination by extending learners' and readers' personal visions of possibilities and illustrating and expanding an unlimited range of human imagination in language learners. Similarly, Chnara and Mariwan (2016) argued that literature stirs as well as stretches the imagination of learners by nourishing their creative process, providing new perspectives and information to enable them to imagine the new possibilities and elaborate on new and original ideas. This way, literature is believed to expand the ability of language learners to express their imagination in images and words.

Elsewhere, Bobkina and Dominguez (2014) suggested that the use of literary works such as plays, stories, novels and poetry in foreign language teaching facilitates easy learning of foreign language by exposing learners to figurative features. According to Saka (2014) the use of literary texts in foreign language classes serves the following functions: enriching language by providing features of written language; serving as authentic material; enabling learner involvement by allowing them to create imaginations from stories, and enables the learner to understand different cultures. Elsewhere, Violetta-Irene (2015) advanced that literary works can be used by teachers to develop imagination in the language learner. According to Violetta-Irene (2015), imagination is a constructive, creative power and every aspect of the learners' learning of language involves imagination.

Violetta-Irene (2015) further opined that literature activates language learners to imagine interacting and talking with other learners, making decisions and choices, assessing advertising, and analyzing news reports. In the same vein, Rahayu (2011) argued that in language teaching, literature serves as a language model to prove that thoughts and language are closely interrelated and that the ability of learners to think for themselves tends to depend on their ability to master language. Literature furnishes a rich model for language as authors tend to frequently use sumptuous words and elaborate sentences. Rahayu (2011) also held that through literature, teachers can listen to language learners as they use a language acquired from interesting stories.

For Tasneen (2010), literature allows language learners to embark on activities that stimulate aesthetic and critical responses in discussing, listening, reading, performing and writing. It exposes language learners to real-life values and transports them to other times and places. Tasneen (2010) further hints that literature allows learners to

closely study literary language and this may reveal many varieties of expressions that are available in English. By revealing a variety of English expressions, literature may sensitize learners to its beauty, sounds, wit, and nuances. Tasneen (2010) also argues that language teachers can use literature to demonstrate to learners how writing involves creating an impact on readers and transforming structures and forms of language, including grammar, syntax, and vocabulary from dry exercises and drills into something relevant and living to the needs of the learner.

## 3.2. Cultural Diversity

Sell (2005) identified cultural diversity as one of the positive effects of teaching literature to language learners. According to Sell (2005) literature teaches cultural diversity and this could help new generation learners to consider cultural diversity acceptable and an important component when it comes to the growth and development of states. Chen (2014) also advanced that collaboration is created upon cultural acceptability and flexibility for other cultures and nationalities. Chen (2014) further noted that teaching new literature to language learners helps increase their understanding and awareness of new cultures as well as their understanding of diverse "living rules". In the same vein, Paran (2008) argued that through literature, language learners can understand cultures and learn about ties between people as well as enable them to understand and appreciate different world cultures. This way, they can develop the understanding that people from diverse cultural backgrounds share the same problems, experiences and emotions.

Nguyen (2016) supports the view that literature provides a picture of other cultures and raises learners' cultural awareness by enabling them to grow socially and personally. Others (e.g., Arias (2017)) opined that the inclusion of literature in foreign language classrooms impacts the learning process by providing valuable authentic material, helping contribute to the learners' cultural and language enrichment and developing personal involvement in the learning process. Arias (2017) further asserts that these positive effects can be achieved provided language teachers use appealing and relevant material to learners by embracing activities that promote reader response, involvement and integrate literature and language. Similarly, Amer (2012) indicates that literature can be used in language classrooms to broaden learners' horizons through information about classics of literature as well as improve learners' general cultural awareness. In furtherance of this view, Küçükoğlu and Sariçoban (2011) opine that literature can be used in foreign language classrooms to stimulate learners' literary imagination and creativity as well as to make them appreciate literature, and introduce learners to masterpieces in American and British literature as educative experience.

Supporting others, Koham and Pourkalhor (2013) developed three models that justify the relevance and effect of literature in language classrooms: cultural model; language model; and personal growth model. The cultural model represents the possibility brought about by literature into the picture with regard to the appreciation and understanding of different ideologies and cultures as well as developing learners' perception of artistic forms and feelings. The language model posits that literature is an instrument for teaching specific structures and vocabulary in language classrooms and thus language is seen as a literary medium. On the other hand, the personal growth model suggests that literature serves as a medium via which learners engage in reading literary texts, appreciate and evaluate cultural artifacts, and understand the culture, the society, and themselves as they function within the social matrix.

Chong and Yeo (2015) and other researchers (Pardede, 2010; Sakthivel, Phil, Kavidha, & Thirumalai, 2010; Tsai, 2012) content that literature is an invaluable resource used by language teachers as a motivating material as well as a bridge to allow learners access to cultural background. According to Nimer, Zahra, and Farreh (2016) literature expands students' language interpretation abilities and awareness and encourages language acquisition. Nimer et al. (2016) further emphasized that literature educates the person and thus promotes personal growth. This view is also reflected in the comment by Siaj and Farrah (2018) that literature focuses on discourse and forms processing skills and this can enhance the language learning psycholinguistic aspect. According to Hall (2005)

literature also improves the learners' reading skills and vocabulary expansion and provides pleasurable, authentic and cultural material.

## 3.3. Source of Historic and Important Information

Sell (2005) notes that literature impacts the teaching of language by acting as a historical document containing information about the time the text was written and the characteristics of the prevailing society. Sell (2005) further holds that literature provides factual as well as precise information about the society and different periods, and contains thoughts of prominent individuals, their pain, happiness and pleasure. It also crystallizes the humans and allows them to learn the art of living by mirroring reality.

## 3.4. Information and Knowledge

Researchers indicate that literature impacts language learning by enhancing learners' understanding of self and others (Abuzahra & Farah, 2016; Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012; Ghiabi, 2014). For example, Ghiabi (2014) asserts that language learners can reflect on other people's experiences by reading literature and perceive themselves through reflections of literature. Ghiabi (2014) further advances that literature increases knowledge and information by facilitating learners to read and participate in experiences that are limited to mere facts. Küçükoğlu and Sariçoban (2011) also advanced that non-fiction writers can stimulate readers to understand and think about many dimensions of concepts read and explored in their books, increase the storage of knowledge, and encourage critical thinking and questioning. In another study, Maples, Ciance, and Maloy (2016) argued that literature stimulates cognition by serving as a sounding board for learners' reasoning and as a source of knowledge. Maples et al. (2016) further opined that literature stimulates critical thinking and cognitive development by activating learners to reflect on substance.

## 3.5. Linguistic Opportunity

Torres (2012) noted that the use of literature in language classroom is justified on grounds that literature provides linguistic opportunities to students and further argued that a work of fiction like a novel engages learners linguistically, intellectually and emotionally as well as provides an involving motivational material for pedagogic activities. Supporting this view, Norton (2009) asserted that reading a novel enhances the learners' language capacity and meaning-making processes.

## 3.6. Listening, Writing and Speaking Skills

Literature is also thought to impact language learners' speaking, writing, and listening skills. According to Chnara and Mariwan (2016) language teachers are often required to ask learners to prepare presentations on various topics and create free discussion platforms in order to help them put in practice the language and learn or improve their level of proficiency. This is where the relevance of literature comes in as through literary texts learners can create free discussions in foreign language classrooms and improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. In a similar study, Ur (1996) indicated that teaching literature to language learners impacts learners in the following different ways. First, it provides learners with different styles of representing language and styles of writing. Second, literature increases the learners' word power and encourages them to develop reading skills. Third, literature can serve as a springboard for creating exciting writing and discussions and it involves. It also involves the intellect and emotions that add to motivation and facilitates the development and refinement of language among learners of the language. Literature creates value in the learner and enriches the world knowledge of the language learners, makes them aware of various human conflicts and situations. Supporting this view, Debreli, Ishanova, and Sheppard (2019) advanced that literature increases the learners' language skills by extending the learners' linguistic knowledge, and improving their speaking, listening and reading skills.

In a similar study, Babaee and Yahya (2014) argued that language can be described as the raw material for literature and that works of literature narrate stories about human experience and thus showcase the versatility and beauty of language. They also held that the inclusion of literary texts in foreign language curriculum allows students to provide exemplary models of literary works and writing and rich experience of the English language.

# 3.7. Controlled Writing

Hall (2005) holds the view that teachers can use literary texts to teach grammar to language learners to help them practice grammar topics and develop their listening skills. In this way, the teacher can facilitate learners to practice grammar and different tenses in the English language. This can be achieved by the teacher reading literary text written in past tense and ask learners to re-write the same texts as it occurred today. Similarly, Violetta-Irene (2015) advanced that literature is relevant in language teaching classrooms as it is non-trivial, challenging and memorable, offers a good model for good writing, and helps learners assimilate the language rhythms and thus facilitate sensibility and intelligence training.

#### 3.8. Writing Skills and Literary Texts

Literary texts serve as a model or source in teaching language learners writing skills. According to Arias (2017), the use of literary texts in language classrooms gives teachers objective information regarding how well learners have learned. The students' texts can also be used by the teacher to get an idea about their ability to analyze a text. Tasneen (2010) points out a few other effects of literature in learning a language namely: literature describes reality and adds value to life; it enriches the competencies that daily life provides and requires; the language learners can learn about English culture and allusions by making references to them. Tasneen (2010) further indicated that through literature, language learners can improve the language used for specific purposes and other elements of language such as vocabulary and that literature provides language learners with a creative and fresh angle from which to approach their lives and studies.

Supporting this view, Starja (2015) observed that literary texts help second language learners to develop literary and linguistic skills. In particular, reading competencies are believed to build four competencies in learners of second language: speaking, writing, listening and reading. Reading competence particularly serves to improve understanding and vocabulary during writing and listening. The argument is that reading competence encompasses sub-skills notably determining keywords, using grammatical and lexical means and generic knowledge to connect the focus the topic; and comprehending the lexis. Reading competence also includes understanding connotations and denotations of the material, identification of the gist and key message, identifying verbs, adjectives, nouns and other grammatical categories, and speculating the meaning of unknown text/words.

Literature also enables language learners to learn about imagination and creativity through playing with different literary roles and interacting with the text. Literature requires learners to present such roles as authentic tasks. This way, it requires learners to discover different learning styles by reading through the texts. Advancing this perspective, Işıklı and Tarakcioglu (2017) argued that language learners can read and live literature by immersing themselves into a different person and different time in a play and that literature allows learners to understand through the histories presented in it the development of the contemporary western culture into what it is today. Furthermore, literature can facilitate language learners to increase their lexicon by reading new phrases and words. Gönen (2018) asserts that through literature, language learners can learn various ways of improving literacy, accessing language reading, sharing culture and learning writing, developing independence and autonomy, guessing unfamiliar words and making hypotheses, and using authentic literary texts to connect to real-world issues and learn values for their lives.

In a similar study, Cimermanova (2015) investigated the effects of graphic novels on teaching a foreign language and observed that creative writing activities, storytelling and pictures, used regularly in foreign language

classrooms, are thought to be authentic material in language teaching. Wordless picture books can effectively discuss social issues in language classrooms that affect adults and teenagers and develop student writing. This study highlighted that illustrations and pictures in books help improve reading literacy by supporting the meaning presented in the text. Illustrations in the books are also thought to help improve the reader's understanding of the text.

Similarly, in a qualitative study involving 21 students in a university in Turkey, Gönen (2018) tested the effectiveness of a poetry-teaching (POT) framework in the English Language Teaching department. Results supported the value of teaching foreign language using poetry as the author found that poetry can be implemented in foreign language classrooms to promote self-expression, creativity, and motivation as well as foster interaction and multi-skill development. The result of this study is supported by Chanmann-Taylor, Bleyle, Hwang, and Zhang (2016) that in foreign language classrooms, poems are beneficial from the literary and linguistic perspectives: enrich vocabulary, foster grammatical knowledge, encouraging learners to practice language forms and skills; improve pronunciation; provide a rich source for foreign language input. Reinforcing this view Lida (2016) opined that poetry increases cross-cultural awareness by promoting literary appreciation, creates social links among learners; and improves the expressive abilities of learners. Poetry is also thought to improve learners' expressive abilities, enhance personal involvedness in the classroom and in the reality, promotes cultural and linguistic knowledge among learners of foreign language.

In general, the use of English literature to teach English has been exemplified in literary texts like short stories, popular fiction, poems, fables, song lyrics and one-act plays and used in teaching second or foreign language. For example, classical texts such as the Dickens' and Shakespeare's works have been used in English classes to offer rich linguistic input to learners. These literary texts greatly helped in learning L2/FL. For example, the work of 19th century novelist Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, helps learners gain multi-sensorial classroom experiences and understand other cultures based on how Hardy depicted the society of the 19th century. By reading this novel, students learn about different aspects of narrative patterns, social norms and other factors that affect language. The depiction of different characters like Michael Henchard, Donald Farfrea and the character of a Lady Lucetta Templeman, can guide students in using the English language eloquently, as, these characters are designed to represent a specific class of people. Similarly, Pardede (2010) talks about teaching short stores in language learning. For example, the short story *A Long Walk Home* activities can help students acquire a good vocabulary.

## 3.9. Pedagogical Advantages

Some researchers argue that literature has its pedagogical advantages when used in second language classrooms. For example, according to Muhammed (2013) the acquisition of English as a second language can be improved by teachers allowing learners to focus on tasks that promote autonomy and encourage free expression of opinions. Literature cultivates linguistic consciousness, educates learners, develops interpretation skills, fosters the acquisition of the second language and motivates learners to learn it. For other scholars, literature should be integrated into foreign language classrooms based on the following two reasons: first, it acts as an ideal model for learning a foreign language because it provides concrete patterns; second, it enables learners to develop knowledge about language and language awareness; and an authentic source of teaching vocabulary and grammar (Mainland, 2013).

Literature is also believed to foster motivation in second language learners by developing their emotions and imagination. Moreover, fables and themes of literary materials are arguably thought to promote meaningful discussions and debates that foster communicative and linguistic competencies. Supporting this view, Lida (2016) advanced that literature learners gain knowledge from norms and cultural values that are reflected in the language. This knowledge affects the learners' worldview and knowledge. Işıklı and Tarakcioglu (2017) also see literature as

accessible to learners on grounds that it combines literary texts and creative language activities (e.g., story rewriting, and participation in role plays). The implementation of learning activities and techniques such as reading literature and filling gaps increase learner's interactions with the texts and facilitates the acquisition of language skills.

# 4. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated herein, the English language can effectively be taught through literature. Language teachers can use literature as a tool to approach English culture and language. It is a way of learning how to spell and write correctly, communicate effectively, think critically, and speak correctly. On this basis, it is recommended that language teachers should embrace literature in foreign language classrooms and make it interesting for students. Doing so will help teachers of English build imagination, creativity and critical thinking in learners, promote cultural diversity and enable learners to develop the ability to handle expressive function; as well as develop writing skills.

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