

## ADVANCING LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH LITERATURE: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

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### Abstract

In this article, the author explores how literature can enhance language education. She argues for integrating literature into language teaching, citing its benefits in fostering critical thinking, cultural understanding, and cognitive skills. Drawing on personal experiences and research, the article contrasts traditional methods with literature-based approaches, emphasizing the latter's effectiveness in engaging students and promoting nuanced language learning. The author also addresses challenges in implementing this approach and calls for educational reforms to embrace innovative teaching methods that seamlessly integrate language and literature. Through compelling examples and evidence, the article advocates for reimagining language education to leverage the transformative potential of literature in shaping proficient and culturally aware language learners

**Keywords:** literature, language education, language teaching, critical thinking, cultural understanding, cognitive skills, traditional methods, literature-based approaches

### Introduction

Literature is unique art form which is created with the help of words. Unlike other art forms, literature does not require special tools, like a canvas in fine arts, or clay in sculpting. Not only does literature have a huge storage of language for which you do not have to pay but this treasure creates unique linguistic constructions. Why not to use them when learning a foreign language? The Uzbek writer, Abdullah Qahhor, in his memoirs, recounts an intriguing experience in learning the Russian language. When preparing for university admission exams, he was required to be proficient in Russian. Since Uzbekistan used to part of the Soviet Union, political circumstances mandated knowledge of Russian. Faced with time constraints, he undertook the task diligently. A friend, proficient in Russian, taught him the language by using Russian fiction. Handing him six books, his friend asked him to read them within two months. Abdullah followed this advice and successfully attained the language proficiency required for university admission. This case illustrates the potential of learning a foreign language through reading a fiction, a method of increasing significance in today's context.

Currently, modern language teaching requires constant updating, the search for more effective methods, and the abandonment of outdated rules and standards. From this point of view, foreign language learning in higher education is optimally enhanced when taught through literature, outperforming traditional methods by simultaneously promoting creative thinking, developing intercultural understanding, and expanding cognitive abilities. To incorporate this approach into education, it is essential not to teach language and literature separately. Literature, as a unique art form, employs language as a tool, underscoring the inherent connection between these two disciplines. Modern research consistently affirms the effectiveness of teaching language through literature. According to Karin A. Wurst, the contemporary aim of education is to cultivate professionals proficient in the target

language while concurrently advancing humanistic-liberal objectives, including the development of critical thinking, communication skills, and a profound understanding of diverse cultures. Based on this, she suggests not separating language and literature as two separate subjects and finds it very effective (Wurst, 2008). The question that may arise is how the above-mentioned advantages of the new method will manifest themselves and what advantages this method holds over time-tested traditional methods of teaching a foreign language.

The traditional method of foreign language teaching, with a history spanning over 100 years, primarily centers on grammar rules and memorization. Students are tasked with memorizing grammatical rules and vocabulary lists, and translation plays a pivotal role, involving the rendering of sentences or texts between the target language and the native language. Advocates of this method argue that a robust grasp of grammar and vocabulary, as facilitated by the traditional approach, can lay a solid foundation for advanced language learning. In recent research, supporters of the traditional method, exemplified by Kaharuddin (2021), underscore the positive impact of employing the grammar translation method, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. Elmayantie (2015) emphasizes the ongoing relevance of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in language education, citing its efficacy in enhancing students' English vocabulary and comprehension. Additionally, Khan, Mansoor, and Manzoor (2016) highlight GTM's role in acquainting English learners with new vocabularies.

While acknowledging the benefits of the traditional method, it must be recognized that understanding grammar and sentence structure, though helpful for grasping the basics of the language, does not equip students with the essential skills needed for future professional activities. This limitation is exacerbated by the tendency to overlook the practical use of language outside educational institutions and in specific sociocultural contexts (Yede, 2020). An alternative approach, studying language through literature, offers a nuanced exploration of diverse language structures and their contextual applications. In contrast to the traditional method, which relies on exercises and translation based on selected fragmentary sentences for grammatical reasons, literature-based language teaching contextualizes language within specific works, providing a more comprehensive understanding.

Moreover, another critical aspect to consider is the teacher's role in foreign language lessons. In the traditional language class setting, the teacher, as an authority figure, wields the power to shape and correct students' perspectives—a viewpoint endorsed by many educators. While traditionally teachers were the primary source of knowledge, the widespread access to information on the Internet challenges this notion. In the past, teachers conveyed information to students, but in today's digital age, students can independently access a wealth of information. Hence the teacher is expected to be not an overseer but an organizer.

Transitioning from language instruction, traditional literature classes also frequently suffer from a lack of active student engagement, leaning towards the passive transmission of information and the imposition of predetermined judgments. This deviates from the main goal of understanding literary works, where ideas are manifested through a variety of artistic means transmitted through language. Hence, the proposed innovative language teaching method, which integrates both literature and language, appears fitting as it introduces adjustments to both components.

From this perspective, the innovative method of teaching language through literature not only provides the opportunity to develop critical and creative thinking but also emphasizes communication and takes a holistic approach. In these classes, students learn language while engaging in debates and small group

conversations, allowing them to express their opinions about the ideas presented in fiction. Undoubtedly, the effectiveness of this new approach to language teaching lies in its anchoring in a specific literary text of a particular culture, providing advantages in the development of intercultural understanding. For instance, the works of the English writer Maugham offer insights into the origins of English culture, while Hemingway's writings illuminate aspects of American culture. Throughout history, numerous examples exist of diplomats who were also writers and poets, possessing deep knowledge of the language and literature of the countries they represented, using literature as a means to study and understand the respective cultures.

Furthermore, the contemporary method provides students with the chance to analyze and reason, fostering the growth of tolerance and empathy. In my teaching experience, I observed a foreign student studying the Uzbek language, who, after reading a novel by the renowned Uzbek writer Abdullah Qodiriy, acknowledged a substantial deepening of his understanding of the nation's religious beliefs. Subsequently, this student went on to write his master's thesis, focusing on the religious aspects depicted in the novel. This is an example illustrating that literary texts also aid in developing the ability to understand the religious and moral sentiments of other people, facilitating the discovery of common ground.

Skeptics may question how such activities contribute to achieving fundamental learning objectives, including the development of the four core language skills traditionally regarded as the primary goals of foreign language teaching: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Teaching language through literature is structured around reading, active communication, and writing. Students engage with fiction by reading, retelling, expressing opinions, and writing essays and reviews. Quizzes, along with reading and listening tests based on fiction, simultaneously evaluate language and literature knowledge, making it easy and accurate to assess students' acquired skills. This approach fulfills the four fundamental requirements for language teaching through the use of fiction. Thus, an obvious benefit is that learning a language through fiction helps improve cognitive skills by expanding the learner's vocabulary, both implicitly and explicitly. Reading the works of recognized classics enriches the lexicon of students. Debates and retellings, integral components of the course, provide students with the opportunity to express their opinions and enhance their speaking skills. Additionally, these activities offer more benefits in terms of aesthetics and emotions. In these classes, student engagement is often higher than in traditional settings. From this perspective, a survey conducted by Bangladeshi researchers on teaching an English language through literature course is noteworthy. In the survey, 30 students participated, with 9 out of 10 admitting a preference for reading literature books over academic ones. About 80% of respondents positively acknowledged reading literature in the original. One hundred percent of respondents expressed no doubt that literature plays a crucial role in improving language skills (Learning English Language Through Literature: Insights from a Survey at University Level in Bangladesh, 2021). The survey results illustrate students' attitudes toward this method, which is common among second language learners.

Ultimately, the main problem is that language departments often resist changing established educational standards or changing curricula. An example is my own experience during the pandemic COVID 19 when I created a new curriculum to teach Russian-speaking students based on Uzbek and world literature. Despite the great results and high rate of student satisfaction, the old program was

reinstated two years later, because the literature curriculum did not align with the standard curriculum approved by the Ministry of Higher Education.

At the same time, one cannot deny the existing problems in implementing this method. The initial challenge is associated with teaching students with different levels of knowledge of foreign language. It is evident that students learning a language at a basic level of foreign language may struggle with complex works of fiction. This issue can be addressed by simplifying or adapting the use of literary texts. Another problem is related to the undervaluation of the role of literature in society. The issue is not that literature has lost its influence and is uninteresting, but rather that people do not engage with books under the influence of other media, such as the Internet and social networks. In this regard, teaching language through literature serves as an effective tool for promoting reading and attracting the younger generation to literature.

In conclusion, the aforementioned points illustrate that teaching language through literature offers numerous advantages, contributing to the enhancement of communication skills, emotional intelligence, and cognitive abilities. Educational departments should assess the current curricula, exploring optimal approaches to incorporate literature-based methods for teaching a second language.

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