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Investigation into the Perceptions of English Teachers and Instructors on the Use of Literature in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Language and literature are difficult to separate since they are closely intertwined with strong bonds. Language teachers, we believe, have an important role in the inclusion of literature in language classes. In this context, the perception of language teachers and instructors are utmost importance in using literature in language teaching processes since they carry their beliefs to their language teaching environments. This qualitative study aims to investigate the perceptions of English language teachers and instructors towards the use of literature in language teaching by collecting data with open-ended questions. A total of 101 English teachers and instructors participated in the study and content analysis was applied to analyze the data. Findings revealed that most English teachers were aware of the importance of using and benefiting from literature while teaching English and made remarks regarding the types of literature such as novels, poems and short stories. Moreover, they believe that using literature can contribute to students' understanding about the target culture and enable them to learn English better. However, specific reference to imagination was so rare among the participants and the relevant literature. This implies the need to raise the need to produce ways of benefiting from the imaginative and creative productions of fiction. The ways to tap into imagination should not be limited to literature conceptualization of which is limited to canonic literature and should include use of English literature, literature in English as well as literature in other languages to the teaching of English language. The study also provides recommendations and implications towards the use of literature in English language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The close relationship between language and its culture has been underlined by many scholars (Brown, 2000; Kramsch, 1994; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Some scholars even claim the impossibility of teaching language with a culture-free approach (Jiang, 2000) since "...the

knowledge of a language's culture is though essential to a full understanding of a language's nuances and meaning..." (Holme, 2002, p. 212) which is crucial for effective communication in the target language. In other words, language learners should have both linguistic and cultural knowledge to be competent in the target language (McKay, 2003). In this context, the importance of integrating literature, which undoubtedly reflects cultural aspects of a given society, into English language classes comes to the fore. However, due to the shifting focus to the functional use of language, the use of literature has seen a decline in popularity in language teaching. In recent years, we have witnessed a renewed interest in the use of literature in language teaching for a variety of reasons and a substantial increase in the number of studies investigating the use of literature in language teaching and learning environments correspondingly.

In the research literature, many benefits of using literature in language classes for various reasons and for different ages and levels have been suggested. In terms of authentic rich and meaningful materials, Hişmanoğlu (2005) suggests that "literature provides students with an incomparably rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers" (p. 65). Ghosn (2002) suggested the use of children's literature in the primary school EFL class for four reasons: providing meaningful and motivating context, representing natural language use for vocabulary development, promoting academic literacy and thinking skills, serving as a good model for developing human character. Literature also helps language learners to be better communicators since it presents a wide variety of examples of real-life language use (Hill, 2986). In addition, the use of literary texts in language teaching can develop language learners' capability in creative thinking (Yavuz, 2010; Zaker, 2016), which has facilitating effect on the language learning process (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2015). Literature is also a source for promoting critical thinking skills of the learners (Khatib & Shakouri, 2013; Lazar, 1993) which has paramount importance in education (Khatip et al., 2011). English poet Shelley defined poetry as "the expression of imagination" in his essay "a defence of poetry" (cited in Richter, 2007, p. 347). In fact, all of the genres of literature includes some sort of imagination which can help to develop the potential of learners. According to Lazar (1993) use of literature in language classes brings various benefits for language learners. First, it encourages language acquisition by providing meaningful and memorable contexts. Second, it motivates language learners since it serves as a bridge to connect classroom and the real world. Third, it provides access for language learners to cultural background of the target language. But Lazar warns that while providing cultural background, one should put their critical lenses on the cultural aspects presented in the literature works. Fourth, it increases the language awareness and also develop the interpretative capabilities of our learners. Collie and Slater (2011) argues that language teachers should use literary texts while teaching because it provides valuable authentic material, cultural and language enrichment and personal involvement.

Various difficulties and problems may also arise while using literature in language teaching. Language teachers struggle with difficulties while they are considering to integrate literary texts into language teaching. Text selection is problematic since it is "...difficult, controversial and ultimately pretty subjective" (McRae, 1991, p.44) and learners' "language proficiency, age, gender, and background knowledge" (Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan, 2011, p.204) also come into play. Another problem is the language used in literary texts since they include demanding syntax and lexis for language learners (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Khatib et al., 2011; Robson, 1989). In addition, cultural concepts in literary texts can present barriers for the learners' understanding of the text (Duff & Maley, 1990; McKay, 1982). In the teaching of culture, naturalness of context is important as what matters is knowing how to interpret cultural aspects in their particular contexts. According to the culture model of Carter and Long (1991: cited

in Yavuz, 2010, p. 67) literature is a tool of understanding and appreciating “different cultures and ideologies.”

According to Paran (2008), the effectiveness of using literature for language learning mainly depends on the teacher’s ability to design appropriate tasks and scaffolding provided by the teacher when necessary. The language teacher should have a balancing role while dealing with literary texts in the class for language learners. They can achieve this by adopting an eclectic approach by aiming “at developing an advanced understanding of literature and contemporaneously develop language abilities by focusing on the links between language form, style and culture” (Carolli, 2008, p. 13). Moreover, when considering the use of literature for language teaching purposes, the language teachers should be cautious and ask themselves many questions related with student needs, levels and grades, goals for learning a language etc. (see Horowitz, 1990) whose answers we believe can determine the effectiveness the use of literature for language teaching purposes.

As we can see, language teachers have an important role in the effective use literature to promote their learners’ language competency. In other words, the perception of language teachers are of utmost importance in using literature in language teaching processes since they carry their beliefs to their language teaching environments and their beliefs shape their practice. A large body of literature has investigated the perceptions of pre-service language teachers towards the use of literature in English language teaching and the role and/or place of literature courses in ELT departments (e.g. Arıkan, 2005; Çıraklı, & Kılıçkaya, 2011; Kaya, 2018; Saka, 2018). However, relatively less is known about the perceptions of language teachers and instructors towards the use of literature in English language learning. This study therefore aims to contribute to this area of research by exploring perceptions of English language teachers and instructors towards the use of literature in English language teaching.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were 101 English language teachers and instructors. 53 participants teach in state secondary and high schools in Ministry of National Education while 15 participants teach in private schools. 28 participants are teaching in state universities and 5 teach in private universities in Turkey. Out of 101 participants, 23 (%22.7) were male teachers and 78 (%77.2) were female teachers. Data collected from 101 English teachers and instructors show that 58 teachers graduated from department of English language teaching, 37 from English language and literature and 5 from translation and interpreting department and one teacher graduated from the department of American language and literature. Of all the participants, 27 have MA and 5 PhD.

Instrument

In this study, purposive sampling technique also known as judgment or selective sampling was adopted. The study adopts a descriptive research type using qualitative research methodology as it is necessary to describe the phenomenon in a real life setting which enabled the researchers to explore individuals and relations, and depended on one’s perspective (Yin, 2003). To this end, six open ended questions were asked to the participants of the study to gain insights into their

perceptions towards the use of literature in English language teaching. Content analysis “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21) was used to make inferences from the data collected through the following open-ended questions: Should literature be benefited in English language teaching? How literature can be benefited in English language teaching? Do you benefit from literature in English language teaching? How much can your BA, MA and PhD degree be effective in your answer regarding above question? How do you benefit from literature in English language teaching? How does the use of literature in English language teaching contribute to the language teaching or the learners?

RESULTS

The findings obtained from the study are presented based on the open-ended questions. The first question asked was “should literature be benefited in English language teaching?”. Based on the responses, an overwhelming majority of the participants (n=95) students think that literature should be used in English language teaching whereas only 6 participants think the opposite (Table 1). This shows that most of the participants acknowledge the importance of literature in English language teaching.

Table 1. Q1: Should literature be benefited in English language teaching?

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	95	94.05
No	6	5.94
Total	101	100

Regarding the second open-ended question which investigates the ways to use literature in English language teaching, most of the participants mentioned the use of that certain literary texts and their analysis in language classes (Table 2). For example, one participant made remarks:

Reading texts and questions can be taken from literary texts. These classic and contemporary novels prepared for the level of students will draw learners' attention (p.13).

At the same time, some of the participants also stated that short stories and poems can be used for language teaching. For example, participants made the following remarks:

Poems and short stories can be read, it may be rhymes (p.33).

Poems and lyrics can be used (p.45).

Short stories and drama activities are wonderful for young learners. The stories paid attention to listen and drama activities willingly performed are always worked out. We also enjoyed much. If the narration is carried out properly, the students are entranced. (p.77)

Based on the responses of 7 participants, the cultural aspects of the language should be paid attention to raise the awareness of language learners. Following excerpts exemplify this point of view:

On behalf of perceiving the target language properly, it is necessary to learn the cultural traits belonging to the target language. The best way to reach is through the integration of literature to the language syllabus. The differences and similarities between the source and target language can raise awareness on students' permanent learning (p.31).

Culture covers everything. Literature and language are the inseparable part of culture. Literature is important not only in language teaching but also in enlarging students' vocabulary (p.40).

Table 2. Q2: How literature can be benefited in English language teaching?

	<i>f</i>	%
Reading certain literary texts and analyzing classic literary works	60	59.4
By giving information about important figures in literature	5	4.9
Through short stories and poems	18	17.8
Raising cultural awareness	7	6.9
Other	5	4.9
Total	101	100

Table 3 shows the responses to the third open-ended question which asks whether the participants benefit from literature in English language teaching. An overwhelming of participants (n=82, 81%) stated that they use literature in English language teaching, which is to a great extent in line with the responses to the first open-ended question.

Table 3. Q3: Do YOU benefit from literature in English language teaching?

	<i>f</i>	%
Yes	82	81.1
No	19	18.8
Total	101	100

The fourth open-ended question was asked to see whether the participants' educational background has effects on their use of literature in English language teaching. According to Table 4, it came out that the education level of the participants has significant effect on their preference for using literature in English language teaching. Some of the participants made the following statements:

The courses in my BA education were very effective (p.30).

My BA and MA in the department of English language and literature affected so much (p.90).

The drama course, literature and language teaching course in BA and Shakespeare and Contemporaries course in PhD contributed much to select suitable literary texts and works (p.65).

Table 4. Q4: How much can your BA, MA and PhD degree be effective in your answer regarding above question?

	<i>f</i>	%
Very effective	68	67.3
Moderate, not so much	8	7.9
Not	3	2.9
Other	22	21.7
Total	101	100

The fifth open-ended question was asked to see ways of literature use by the participants. According to Table 5, 30 participants stated that they use certain types of literary texts appropriate for their learners' proficiency levels in the target language. For example, participants stated:

I benefit from literature in the class by using suitable literary works (p.45).

By using appropriate texts to the students' proficiency level. For example, even teaching songs can be benefited from literature (p.1).

23 participants benefit from literature through novel, short story, poem and film. **Seven participants highlighted movie adaptations of literary works as sources for use of literature in teaching English (two of whom specified it as movie adaptations of novels, and one added TV shows (series) to movies. Besides these participants, one participant shared her observation of the benefit of connecting literary products with videos and paintings (of those who both write and paint) that relate to them.** Participants benefiting from the novel, short story and poem in teaching English put emphasis on the fact that these literary devices can be used as teaching materials in the classrooms in line with the unit topics, which makes the lesson more effective and understandable. The statements made by participants:

...through reading texts, films and documentaries (p.29).

I use literary devices as teaching materials both inside and outside of the classroom, in this sense short stories are very valuable (p.100).

Some other participants made remarks such as:

I benefit short story and translated films (p.86).

I use stories and short play scripts. We perform at the end of the year. I taught drama courses (p.17).

However, based on the responses given to the question, it is clear that 12 participants stated that they don't benefit from literature:

I don't benefit much (p.33).

I don't (p.28).

I wish I could say I benefit in such ways. My students' English level is unfortunately not very good, so I don't benefit (p.76).

I don't (p.94).

I don't benefit directly in English language teaching, however as a graduate from English philology, I sometimes cite from English writers and poets, for example "TO BE OR NOT TO BE" (p.14).

Table 5. Q5: How do YOU benefit from literature in English language teaching?

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Using appropriate literary texts	30	29.7
Novel, poem, short story and film	23	22.7
In grammar teaching	1	0.9
In vocabulary teaching	5	4.9
For raising cultural awareness	3	2.9
I don't benefit from literature	12	11.8
Other	27	26.7
Total	101	100

Regarding the last open-ended question which investigates the possible contributions of literature in English language teaching, the results indicate that 52 participants stated that using

literature helps students' improvement in their language skills such as grammar, reading, vocabulary and writing. Some of the participants' remarks are as follows:

Improvement in reading ability, learning and using new vocabulary items contribute to the language learning (p.89).

It enhances students' vocabulary (p.46).

By improving reading and writing ability, it also enriches mental lexicon (p.41).

It supports reading and speaking ability (p.47).

Sixteen participants stated that through literature, students become aware of the target culture and gain cultural awareness. Seven of them also responded that literature enable students to develop their ability to think, analyze and evaluate thereby making them imaginative. For example, participants stated:

Literature in language teaching develops one's ability to think (p.21).

Literature enables learners have a clear mind and develops one's imagination and critical thinking. In language teaching, reading one text always inspires to read another one, thus improves vocabulary (p.55).

Table 6. Q6: How does the use of literature in English language teaching contribute to the language teaching?

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Improving reading ability	15	14.8
Contextual grammar, natural process of language	18	17.8
Being aware of target language, cultural awareness	16	15.8
Developing vocabulary knowledge	14	13.8
Developing one's ability to make comment, broadening power of imagination	7	6.9
Enhancing reading and writing skill	5	4.9
No contribution	2	1.9
Other	24	23.7
Total	101	100

As for the overall findings of the study, the overwhelming majority of the participants believe that use of literature has positive effects on language teaching. They also believe that literature should be benefited in English language teaching. Based on the participants' remarks, using novels, poems, short stories in language classes can contribute to the students' English proficiency in terms of many aspects such as vocabulary learning and grammar accuracy. In addition, it contributes to broadening students' horizon and making them knowledgeable, increasing their awareness about the target culture. However, a very small number of the participants stated that literature has almost no effect on students' language proficiency. This negative perception may have arisen from various reasons such as lack of adequate educational background of teachers and instructors on how to use literature in language teaching, the content of the English course books they use, the perceptions of their students towards the use of literature in language teaching.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

A considerable number of studies have been published on the use of literature in foreign language teaching. Many studies have noted the intertwined relationship between language and

culture (Brown, 2000; Kramsch, 1994; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Literature is a form of cultural collection and has direct relationship with language. Despite some cautious views on the use of literature for language learning, (see introduction section) “it is clear that literature does have something very special to offer to language learning” (Paran, 2008, p.190) and the use of literary texts can “...promote language and culture learning at a deep level” (Carolli, 2008, p.2) since they are authentic texts representing culture and language. In foreign language classes, language teachers have an important role of being a decision maker in every part of the lesson and therefore shape the language teaching processes in their classes. For this reason, their perceptions towards the use of literature bear importance to the inclusion of literature into their lessons.

This study was conducted to gain insights into the perceptions of language teachers and instructors about the use of literature in English language teaching. The findings of the current study show that despite nearly one tenth stating that personally they did not utilize literature, most of the participants agree that literature should be a part of English language teaching and majority of them expressed that they use literature in English language teaching. Most of them also agree that their educational background has had an effect on considering literature as beneficial for language teaching purposes. As clear from the findings, majority of participants consider literature use beneficial in various ways such as enhancing vocabulary knowledge, increasing cultural awareness, developing language skills of students particularly reading and writing. They also have different opinions on how to use literature in English language teaching such as analyzing classical literature works, using short stories and poems and giving information about the important figures in the literature.

Together, the findings of the current study seem to be some evidence that a great majority of the language teachers and instructors in the current study have positive perceptions towards the use of literature for English language teaching purposes. These results indicating the positive perceptions of language teachers and instructors are in line with the results of similar studies (e.g. Kayaoğlu et al., 2012) and also in line with those conducted on the pre-service English language teachers (Çıraklı, & Kılıçkaya, 2011; Saka, 2018) However, the findings of the current study must be interpreted with caution because they only show the participants’ positive perceptions on the use of literature in English language teaching, but do not provide evidence that their use of literature in their teaching environments is effective in terms of language development in their learners, indicating the need to further investigate the issue.

Nearly two-thirds of the participants emphasize the benefits of authentic texts and works of classical literature. Constructing cultural awareness is very rare. Obtaining knowledge about authors of literary works is seen to be very rare. Nearly the three-fourths emphasize the powerful effects on their responses of their formal education backgrounds.

The rate in the answers of the direct reference to cultural awareness is also very low. Given the need for the skills of interpreting culture with the variety of dimensions in a variety of contexts, much effort should be shown to increase such awareness. Specific reference to imagination is even rarer. Imagination and creativity are significant aspects. It is necessary to show sensitivity and find ways to benefit from imagination.

Based on the responses of the participants, some implications may be drawn on what types of literary works can be used and how they can be employed in language teaching. Five participants made use of writing essays on and reading essays about literary works. Ten participants reported drama activities as a tool for use of literature in teaching English. However only four of them reported that they use theatre activities. Four participants reported the importance of lyrics of songs. Voiced by two participants, intonation and stress also constitute a highlighted finding

relating to songs and theatre and movie adaptations of literary works. Two participants stated that they use plot and character analysis. One participant believes that literature teaches how to look from the perspectives of characters and empathizing with them. Protagonists and antagonists as archetypal characters may be analyzed and interpreted. Although not specifically mentioned, alliteration, rhyme and assonance can be great tools for vocabulary recall. Poems, movie scripts, song lyrics, and theatre plays contain also creative use of language whose use may help deepen the understanding of the students.

The authors hold the view that integrating literature to foreign language teaching, in our case, to English language teaching can contribute the language development of English language learners but this is not easy and requires serious consideration of a range of factors coming into play if the expected benefits from the inclusion of literature to their lessons are to be achieved in the process. These factors include detailed planning in line with the lesson objectives, well-chosen literary works based on the needs, interests, and language levels of the students, appropriate literary type and well-designed tasks and activities. Without considering such factors at the onset, literature use for language teaching may risk time and effort spent and fail to reach expected and desired outcome despite the positive perceptions of language teachers and instructors towards the use of literature in their language classes. In order to achieve this efficiently, a paradigm shift is necessary. The perceptions regarding literature and foreign language education show a dichotomy. Problems arise as to the lack or weakness of connections in between. There is dichotomy in the disconnection between general education and ELT, voiced by Johnson (1996) as well. A contribution potential to a solution would be conceptualizing English language teaching within the framework of applied linguistics and/or cultural studies.

Increasing coverage of literary works of popular culture may also be recommended. According to Kramsch (1995), due to the effect of demographic and social changes on industrialized countries, learning a foreign language was transformed into other multi-faceted living cultures of other people reaching beyond the canonization of the recognized established cultural canon composed of great works by Shakespeare, Goethe or Voltaire. Parallel to this argument, Zengin, Altıntaş and Toraman (2016) state that use of literature in English language teaching should not be limited to the canonic literature and other literary works should not be marginalized but underline the present picture reflecting the canonization of many literary products of “high culture”, marginalization and underestimation of imaginative and creative literary products. Reporting the views of the students of English language and literature departments, Zengin, Altıntaş and Toraman (2016) found that their participants criticize the view that popular culture works should not be considered as literature. The study voiced the need to evaluate popular culture products within the framework of literature use.

In literary thematic approach highlighted in *A Guide to curriculum planning in English language arts* (1990) popular works of fiction are defended with regard to their potential in the increase in student reading despite the views against popular works of fiction. In literary thematic approach it would be a proper objective to expose students to good literature and timeless existence of values and concerns of humanity instead of making them junior literary critics, besides the high quality of children and youth literature should find its place in the school curriculum. Furthermore, choice of literary works can change depending on different groups or individuals, which brings an advantage in terms of individual differences.

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