

Using Stylistics to Interpret Literary Texts in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Stylistics plays a key role in interpreting pieces of literary writing. It is considered to be the most appropriate and principled approach to study literary texts regarding its comprehensive nature that tries to link two disciplines, linguistics and literary criticism. Focusing on the various linguistic features of texts, stylistics seems to be a powerful tool that- if used properly- can endorse English as Foreign Language (EFL) students to analyze and appreciate literature in all its manifestations in a practical and objective way. The present paper aims at showing the effectiveness of opting for the stylistic analysis in the EFL context. It also attempts to accentuate the significance of the aforementioned approach in facilitating learning literature and making it an enjoyable task for both teachers and learners as well. The overall goal of this research is to investigate whether stylistics is an effective and relevant approach to analyze literary texts.

Key words:

Stylistics - Teaching literature - Linguistic features - EFL students - Literary text.

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إدراج الأسلوبية لتحليل النصوص الأدبية في تعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية

الملخص

تلعب الأسلوبية دورا مفتاحيا في ترجمة الكتابات الأدبية حيث أنها تعتبر المنهج المناسب لدراسة النصوص الأدبية نظرا لطبيعتها التي تحاول المزج بين اللسانيات والنقد الأدبي. بالتركيز على الخصائص اللغوية للنصوص، تظهر الأسلوبية كأداة قوية التي -إن أحسن استعمالها- بإمكانها مساعدة طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتحليل وتذوق الأدب في جميع تجلياته بطريقة عملية وموضوعية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى إبراز فعالية استعمال الأسلوبية في سياق تعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية. كما يحاول التأكيد على أهمية المنهج السالف ذكره في تسهيل تعلم الأدب وجعله مهمة ممتعة للطلبة والأساتذة على حد سواء. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية بشكل عام الى تقصي مدى فاعلية الأسلوبية في دراسة النصوص الأدبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الأسلوبية - تدريس الأدب - الخصائص اللغوية - الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية - طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية - النصوص الأدبية.

L'Utilisation de la Stylistique pour Interpréter les Textes Littéraires dans la Classe d'Anglais Langue Étrangère

Résumé

La stylistique joue un rôle clé dans l'interprétation des œuvres littéraires. Elle est considérée comme l'approche la plus appropriée, elle est fondée sur les principes qui servent à étudier les textes littéraires en ce qui concerne leur nature globale qui tente de relier deux disciplines : la linguistique et la critique littéraire. Se concentrant sur les différentes caractéristiques linguistiques des textes, la stylistique semble être un outil puissant qui, s'il est utilisé correctement, peut soutenir les étudiants en anglais langue étrangère (EFL) pour analyser et apprécier la littérature dans toutes ses manifestations d'une manière pratique et objective. Le présent article vise à jeter la lumière sur l'efficacité d'opter pour l'analyse stylistique dans le contexte de l'EFL. Il tente également de démontrer l'importance de l'approche susmentionnée pour faciliter l'apprentissage de la littérature et en faire une tâche agréable pour les enseignants et les apprenants. L'objectif global de cette recherche est d'étudier si la stylistique est une approche efficace et pertinente pour analyser les textes littéraires.

Mots clés:

Stylistique - Enseignement de la littérature - Caractéristiques linguistiques - Les apprenants en anglais langue étrangère - Texte littéraire.

Introduction

In interpreting literature, stylistics performs a twofold role; it first highlights the formal linguistic characteristics of a text and then it serves for the interpretation of the textual content. Literature represents a raw material of language learning owing to its rich nature and its exposure to research and investigation. In this vein, EFL teachers opt for using it as it allows students to taste literature and analyze its language deeply. Besides, it is deemed as an authentic material for it depicts the authors' experiences drawn from their everyday lives. In order to enhance the EFL students' language proficiency, a plenty of approaches to literature have been suggested. Some of these approaches which are literary in their nature view literature as a message; others which analyze literature from a linguistic perspective consider it as a text. Stylistics tends to relate both sides. Thus, it treats literary texts as discourse (Widdowson, 1975).

In a typical EFL context, using stylistics to analyze literary texts seems to be favorable for a bunch of advantages. Hall (2015) claims that the use of stylistics is favored by educationists since it represents an intentional exploration of literary texts following principled and systematic ways. Stylistics allows students to examine the diverse linguistic features, patterns, and permitting them to draw analogies among different texts.

Taking the EFL context into consideration, stylistics is sometimes included in university curricula under the umbrella of applied linguistics module. The issue is that whether the EFL students are able to apply stylistics properly when studying and examining literary texts or not. The probable answer is that this claim might be true, particularly when taking into account that language students are already familiarized with linguistics and the analysis of literary texts at different language levels be them phonetic, morphological, syntactic etc. This fact makes it possible for students to apply stylistics competently (Benzoukh, 2017).

Trying to investigate the significance of opting for stylistics in studying literary texts would be meaningless without shedding light on the importance of incorporating literature in the EFL classrooms and using stylistics as a means of approaching it. Therefore, a brief overview about literature, stylistics and their importance is worth mentioning.

1. Stylistics: Nature and Goals

Stylistics concerns itself with examining the relationship between the linguistic patterns and the aesthetic or literary function. Thus, it is quite unfair to consider it as a mechanical system. The reader's intuitions and reactions to the literary piece can be said to be unavoidable. In other words, when treating a literary text there will be always a portion out of control. In this line, Dylan Thomas maintains that literature affects the reader in a mysterious way that makes him feel moved by words (Leech & Short, 1981).

1.1. Definition

The plainest definition that could be offered to stylistics is the one suggested by Wales (2011, p. 399) who claims that "stylistics is the study of style". Style in this respect is termed as the way of expressing thoughts, be it written or spoken. Stylistics can be looked at from different perspectives according to the diversity of branches derived from linguistics and literary criticism. Lazar (2007) in her turn provides a definition of stylistics as being a way or a method of permitting students to reach an aesthetic appreciation of a text focusing on its linguistic features linked to students' intuitions to generate meanings.

From the definition provided by Lazar we can deduce that stylistics serves as a kind of glue between the literary function and the linguistic patterns in a given text. Widdowson (1975) suggests a more inclusive definition which demonstrates that stylistics is studying literary texts from a linguistic perspective, what makes stylistics distinguishable from literary criticism and linguistics is that it is an area of mediation between both of them and links the two disciplines.

Stylistics entails analyzing the linguistic components of a text so as to figure out how the meanings of the text are conveyed. Semino (1975) points out that the linguistic analysis of a literary text is not the literal interpretation of its meaning, but it rather explains the why and the how of what it means.

Goals of Stylistics

Stylistics has two basic objectives: to assist students to come up with meaningful perceptions to the literary piece, and to supply students of knowledge about how the language system works in principle (Lazar, 2007).

Stylistics is never meant to replace literary criticism; it rather attempts to prepare the floor for it, aiming to help learners to operate efficiently when trying to

interpret literary texts. Hence, stylistics and literary criticism support and complement each other

Stylistic analysis is appropriate for it enables students first to examine carefully the linguistic features of a literary text and then to provide a literary interpretation. In this vein, stylistics affirms that it is possible for students to access the deeper meanings of a text by themselves and to make potent critical judgments without resorting to readymade criticism. (Widdowson, 1975).

2. Literature in the EFL Curriculum

Introducing literature in the EFL curricula is advantageous. Students need to be constantly exposed to fiction as McRae (1991) anticipates that in future years; the absence of imaginative content in language teaching will be considered to have marked a primitive stage of the discipline.

Since literature is employed as a material to enhance the language proficiency and as a resource to enlarge students' knowledge and cultural background rather than an end in itself, teachers expect a lot of advantages to get. McRae (1991) argues that there exists a firm bond between language learning and literary study. Additionally, they ought to be considered as complementary and in mutual benefit at all phases in the educational process. There are some major key elements which advocate using literature in the EFL classrooms and endorse teachers to make use of it. Duff and Maley (2003) affirm the fact about this issue as in the following:

The primary aim of our approach is quite simply to use literary texts as are source for stimulating language activities. This enables us to cut away the dead weight of critical commentary, metalanguage and explanation which has historically been associated with work on literary text. What we are interested in is engaging the students interactively with the text, with fellow students, and with the teacher in the performance of tasks involving literary text. In so doing students are obliged to pay careful attention to the text itself and to generate (language in the process of completing the task. (p.5

2.1. The Purpose of Teaching Literature in the EFL Setting

In the EFL context, teaching literature is perceived differently according to the diverse purposes it is meant to fulfill. The primary purpose of teaching literature is a bi-fold. On the one hand, Literature as study is thought of to be a cultu-

ral product when interpreting it by referring to some key elements which are not present within the literary work such as historical, social or biographical aspects. In such a way, literature enhances the students' cultural background. Brumfit and Carter (2000) suggest that literature represents a major aspect of culture, and many people wish to study it in its own right. Moreover, when comparing it to other cultural phenomena, access to it is easy.

The secondary purpose is making use of literary texts as a resource for the English language instruction. Literary texts are generally rife with language aspects that can be exploited for teachers' instruction. Short and Candlin maintain that literary texts include a very wide range of varieties of English which can serve as a useful resource in sensitizing learners of English to linguistic variations and the different values associated with different varieties. (Short & Candlin, 1982). It is assumed that in the EFL setting both purposes are suitable and able to be implemented since their methods and aims are intertwined (Vera, 1991).

2.2. The Advantages of Using Literature

Although the advantages of incorporating literature in the EFL curricula are well documented in a number of references, a brief reminder serves well the purposes of the present inquiry.

2.2.1. Literature as an Authentic Material

As a starting point, literature is regarded as an authentic material simply because it draws from the experiential world of the author. The language of literary pieces is genuine and free of tailoring. In this line, Duff and Maley (2003, p.6) point out that "In terms of the language, literary texts offer genuine samples of very wide range of styles, registers, and text-types at many levels of difficulty. For this reason alone, they are worthy of consideration"

Literature introduces learners to a higher level of language uses and forms because it is initially addressed to native speakers who are supposed to master their mother tongue.

2.2.2. Literature as a Resource of Cultural Enrichment

Literature is beneficial when it comes to viewing it as a resource of cultural enrichment. It is such a vast arena where writers lean on describing their characters, eliciting from several social classes, contexts and depicting people from

different walks. Writers generally offer a vivid and detailed depiction of how life goes on and how people behave, speak, believe and the like. In other words, writers in their fiction tend to give a full image and a detailed account of the target culture. Along with other teaching materials, literature is thought of to be a valuable component to augment the foreign learner's understanding of the target country's lifestyle whose language is being learnt.

2.2.3. Literature as a Resource of Language Enrichment

Another point often aimed at through learning literature is language enrichment. Students are exposed to a sort of contextualized written language. Consequently, they gain familiarity with the language system and how it works. Also, literary texts represent a rich source of new vocabulary and language structures. Integrating the basic language skills is another useful aspect of opting for literary texts. By giving students prompts to move smoothly from one activity to another, written texts prepare the floor for other tasks of different modes and enable learners to engage for example in oral activities that may enhance their communicative competence.

2.2.4. Personal Involvement and Growth in Personality

The nature of literary texts urges learners to be acquainted with its content. For instance, in the sequence of events, readers feel as if they are part of the fiction be it a novel, a play and short story. In so doing, learners go one step further in exploring the underlying meanings beyond the rule-based system of the target language. In addition to that, they start getting closer to certain characters and share their feelings throughout the unfolding of the story (Collie & Slater, 1990).

Keeping in the same line of mentioning the benefits of literature, Lazar (2007) claims that literature may also develop students in a holistic way besides the linguistic advantages. It can foster students' imagination, improve their critical thinking and develop a deep understanding of their emotions. For instance, when asking students to react to a given text personally, they will be able to express their ideas and emotions freely the fact that elevates their self-confidence. Clandfield supports Lazar's view by claiming that literature offers students a multitude of chances to grow. Clandfield (2005) puts this as follows:

Literature encourages interaction. Literary texts are often rich in multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively mined for discus-

sions and sharing feelings or opinions. Furthermore, by examining values in literary texts, teachers encourage learners to develop attitudes towards them. These values and attitudes related to the world outside the classroom. This means, literature educates the whole (person). (p.1

Illustrating the above-mentioned views, the following figure show literature can develop students holistically:

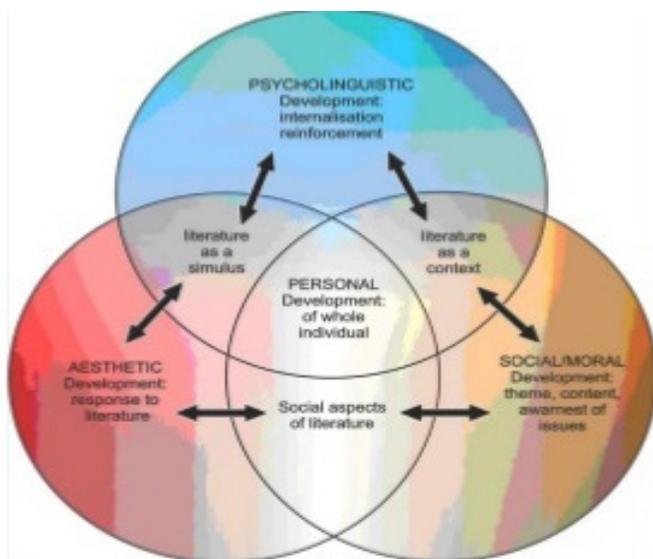


Figure. 1: The Role of Literature in Developing the Whole Individual (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014, p.3)

As represented in Figure. 1, literature improves students' level in three core distinctive areas: aesthetic, psycholinguistic and socio-moral. The aesthetic factor targets the students' aesthetic engagement in reading the text and appreciating its beauty of expression. The psycholinguistic factor focuses on the students' acquisition and assimilation of some conducts and behaviors. Lastly, the socio-moral area deals with theme and content and enables students to be aware of the various issues. All of the aforementioned areas contribute in a way or another to the holistic growth of students paying attention to different personal sides (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014).

3. Deciding What Literary Materials to Teach

The question why using literature in the EFL context has been clearly sketched in the section before. Now the issue is what to teach; in other words, which

content is appropriate and how to approach it, i.e., which methods are suitable and most fitting to apply to dissect literature so as to make it more accessible to students. Teachers should make the right decision basing it on their students' needs, expectations and preferences (Benzoukh, 2017). In this concern, Maley and Moulding (1985) argue:

While deciding what to teach the language teacher can choose any literary genre – novels, plays, short stories or poems- provided that it is appropriate to the needs, interests, maturity and language level of the EFL students. Also, the cultural background, life experiences, emotions or dreams of the learners are important while selecting the (literary work. (p.10

Selecting appropriate literary texts depends on some key criteria, according to Lazar (2007) there are three main areas to be thought of: the type of students, the course that the teacher intends to deliver and other characteristics related to the text itself.

To guarantee the effectiveness of literary materials inserted in the EFL curriculum, teachers should give a special care to their choice. For instance, if the chosen text doesn't fit the learners' level of proficiency, teachers cannot expect to get the maximum of benefit out of it. As Alemi (2010) points out that opting for a difficult short story that belongs to a famous novelist such like T.S. Eliot as a teaching material for EFL students proves to be quite tough and defiant. When the language of the text goes with the students' level, it may motivate them to carry on their reading and respond aptly to it. Consequently, students need to be linguistically ready to deal appropriately with the literary text.

Another important point is whether a given literary text has the ability to actively involve learners and arouse their interest so as to stimulate them to react in a positive way. When the work is appealing and enjoyable, it might have a long-lasting impact on the learners (Collie & Slater, 1990). In this respect, McKay (2001) agrees that students read and react to a text if the subject matter of the text relates somehow to their life experience and interests.

It is highly recommended to select books which match with the learners' everyday life experiences, emotions and aspirations. Another point to be taken into account is the level of language difficulty. In order to bridge the linguistic and the cultural vacuum, it is much better to opt for a work that suits the EFL stu-

dents' normal level. That is to say, it should neither be too difficult to grasp and infer the underlying meanings, thus, students feel bored when checking words' meanings too often, nor too simple and easy that does not represent a challenge to students. In case the language of the literary work is direct and simple, this might be useful to choose yet it is not a main benchmark as important as interesting, motivating and pertinent content.

Time availability is a key point to take into account when selecting materials. Teachers ought to be sure of the amount of time dedicated to studying a text and they need to budget their time before hand in order to provide students with the background knowledge to equip them to examine the text.

To define a text as appropriate to the EFL students, it should be culturally appropriate and targets the students' cultural competence. The brevity of the selected text is also a motivating factor to appreciate reading literature. When the length text is at the students' hand, it makes them feel that they accomplished something in English this fact consolidates their self-confidence and boosts their desire to read. When material s' selection is fulfilled accurately, teachers need to think of the most fitting way of approaching it.

4. Stylistics as an Approach to Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom

Stylistics in the EFL context appears to be the most fitting approach to study literary texts for it caters to the needs of learners to get the maximum of benefit out of the literary text. Moreover, it helps students to interpret and analyze texts efficiently, offering them multiple chances to practice language (Lazar, 2007).

The approach is also a trial to make learners aware of how literary texts operate as discourse. The importance of stylistics in the EFL classrooms lies in equipping learners with the necessary means to link their experiences with the literary text and so they try to enlarge that experience (Widdowson, 1975).

Traditionally, studying and analyzing literary texts was fulfilled by means of literary theory that relies basically on the learners' intuition which proves to be subjective, immeasurable and focusing on the part of the literary text. This is owing to the lack of strategic methods and processes of analysis.

Conversely, stylistics makes use of a bundle of measures and procedures based on the grammatical characterization that students are logically familiar

with so as to give the appropriate justifications to the literary intuitions. In such a way, stylistics helps learners both to enjoy the beauty of literature and to comprehend the language system profoundly. Comparing literary texts is also another asset of implementing the stylistic analysis (Lazar, 2007).

Shifting to the balance of authority in the classroom, teaching literature was initially based on lecturing and it was a purely teacher-centered approach. The latter tends to exclude learners' engagement giving thus teachers the full authority to manage the flow of the lesson. Yet, stylistics guarantees students' participation and involvement in that they analyze texts independently. Hence, learners become the active doers of the learning process and play a participatory role in the reading process (Meenakshi, 2015).

5. How Is Stylistics Applicable in the EFL Classroom?

Stylistic analysis is applied by means of describing the linguistic features of a given text. According to Crystal and Davy (1969), the various procedures applied in stylistics to analyze literary texts are akin to those employed in linguistic exercises. The first step to do is to list and arrange the various features within a framing of a given linguistic theory. The primary aim of this operation is to provide a repertoire of correlated contrasts and alternatives. Crystal and Davy (1969, p.10) argue that 'features' signify in this context any bit of speech or writing which a person can single out from the general flow of language and discuss - a particular word, part of a word, sequence of words, or way of uttering a word.

In doing so, it should be taken into consideration that the analyst is not obliged to account for everything present within the passage; he is only concerned with features that are stylistically meaningful. Eventually, it is likely to find any descriptively appropriate grammatical rules incorporated, all stylistically significant data. In brief, the process of analysis pivots on three main steps; first, the analyst should define the entire set of linguistic features which are determined intuitively to be carrying some stylistic significance and appoint a particular way to describe them (metalanguage). Then, the analyst should lay a method of analysis. Finally, the functions of the previously mentioned features should be tackled and clearly defined by means of arranging them into categories based on the extra- linguistic value they have.

6. Conclusion

Opting for literature in the EFL classrooms is favored since it serves to train and educate the individual as a whole. Teachers have to give a special care to the literary works they select to incorporate in their instruction; at the same time, they should facilitate the learners' task by choosing the best methods to approach the literary texts

Shedding light on stylistics as a comprehensive and systematic approach to study literary texts can ensure the enjoyable process of reading and analyzing literature. However, EFL students should bear in mind that stylistics and literary criticism are complementary, hence they have to make use of both of them to come up with a more convincing and satisfactory interpretation.

The significance of stylistics in the EFL setting is clearly embodied in helping students to act more confidently by providing a more systematic and strategic aid to treat texts employing a bunch of analytic tools and procedures. Consequently, being aware of the benefits of using stylistics in the EFL context is of prime importance since it can be paying off for students and teachers as well.

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