

## Literary Texts: A Means to Promote Language Proficiency of Upper-Intermediate Level EFL Students

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### Abstract

In communicative language teaching (CLT) authentic texts have been emphasized, as they were taken from real life and could, correspondingly, be used for real communication. On the other hand, literary texts are simultaneously authentic (not created for educational purposes / language learning) and exemplary (written by authors very highly qualified in language). Due to this, authentic literary texts are essential tools of the development of language proficiency; thereby, literary works have been supported in language classes as they provide authentic materials. Literary texts were used in Grammar-Translation Method as samples of appropriate language. However, with the communicative methods, for a certain period, such authentic texts as newspaper news, advertisement, touristic brochure, etc. have taken the floor and have withdrawn literary texts to the periphery of language teaching / learning. Nowadays, there is a certain revival of interest towards literary texts as a medium to engage in linguistic forms and speech communicative functions. The use of literature for language teaching can provide an avenue for advantages in language proficiency. Literature is a potentially worthwhile source for coming to good terms with an extensive range of enrichment in linguistic knowledge for successful language acquisition. This study argues for an emphasis on a preference for incorporating literary texts into foreign / second language teaching in order to enable language learners at upper-intermediate level to apply language resources skillfully. The study also compares the application of literary texts with that of simplified texts and endeavors to reveal which text type benefits more language learners.

**Key Words:** authentic text, literary text, simplified text, language input, language proficiency

### 1. Introduction

The use of literature (fiction) in language teaching is a controversial issue. Literary texts were used in Grammar-Translation Method as samples of appropriate language. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reading (fiction) literature with deep understanding was still the ultimate goal of language study, with the advent of Natural / Direct methods the

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importance of literary texts decreased, and they were almost removed from language classroom in the 1960s and 1970s, when communicative language teaching became the trend in second / foreign language teaching. It happened owing to the widespread perception that the language of fiction was too sophisticated and often outdated and, consequently, had little functional application. In the late 1970s and 1980s literature once again became a contributing force to the development of language proficiency. For the last few decades the language-literature division has been discarded from the foreign language classroom and literature has been situated at the core of language curriculum (Kern, 2008). Literature has become an influential tool over the last two decades and it has been creating an environment in the language classroom where learners can experience the functioning of language applications that help learners to develop language proficiency. The inclusion of literature in language teaching on higher levels has been favored for its linguistic and motivational mightiness. Literature provides an ideal context for coming to good terms with language development (Liaw, 2001), cultural enrichment (McKay, 1982), and personal growth (Collie & Slater, 1987). While working on literature, language learners are at an advantage to promote language awareness (Kramsch, 1994). Literary texts provide rich authentic materials for language learners that allow them to notice various aspects of the target language. Compared to simplified (either abridged/adapted from authentic texts or created by textbook author to illustrate the language under study) texts, the use of authentic literary texts in language learning builds an ethos for learners to recognize different usage patterns of the target language.

This paper presents a comparison of the application of authentic literary texts with simplified texts with the goal of making language input more accessible for learners. The research examines whether authentic texts lead to better language proficiency than simplified texts.

## **2. Authentic Literary Texts: The Use of Literature in the Language Classroom**

"An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort" (Morrow, 1977, p. 13). Authenticity is an essential concept in CLT. Among authentic texts such texts as newspaper news, advertisement, touristic brochure, etc. have taken the floor and have withdrawn literary texts to the periphery of language teaching / learning. This occurred due to two reasons: non-fiction texts, whether authentic or not, are simpler by both language and contents and easier to read, and contemporary people read non-fiction more often than fiction.

However, nowadays a certain revival of the role of authentic literary texts is going on. Widdowson (1975) argues that literary texts offer a unique advantage over non-fiction ones because the former rely so heavily upon the reader's interpretation: a literary work is "separate, self-contained" with its language fashioned into "patterns of recurring sounds, structures and meanings" on symbolic and thematic levels (p. 36). Literary texts make readers think, interpret and develop their comprehension / interpretation strategies.

The incorporation of literature into language teaching has been supported in many researches (Ghosn, 2002; Collie & Slater, 1987; Maley, 1989; McKay, 1982) which suggest that literature offers a motivating medium for

language development. Literature provides authentic materials which are good models for learners to process real language in context. In other words, literature presents natural language to learners that expose them to a great wealth of comprehensible input (Krashen, 2016). It is worth considering that the development of linguistic knowledge (Mattingly, 1984) and advancement of reading proficiency (McKay, 1982) are feasible by means of literature.

From linguistic viewpoint, authentic materials contain more casual verbs and particles which are better at displaying cause-and effect relationship (Crossley et al., 2007). On the other hand, language used in simplified texts is unnatural (Willis, 1998); thus, they may have a negative impact on the quality of students' language skills. In addition, authentic texts use more connectives that are used for linking ideas. Their frequent usage in texts enables language learners to see the cohesive bonds between text sections (Halliday, 1985). Minimizing the use of connectives makes it difficult for the learners to understand the text.

From pedagogical angle, the application of literary texts has the potential to extend linguistic knowledge as learners plunge into a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures in the process of reading. Spack (1985) argues that "it is in literature that the resources of the language are most fully and skillfully used" (p.705). Thereby, while reading fiction texts, language learners notice functions of grammatical structures and learn vocabulary through constant exposure to meaningful contexts. Literature is a potentially rich source of meaningful input (Pugh, 1989); thereby it maximizes language learning experience (Barrette, Paesani, & Vinall, 2010). It goes without saying that learners are at an advantage to develop their language proficiency by means of sufficient amount of comprehensible input when they are exposed to literary texts. Linguistically, literary texts provide natural language to learners which allow learners to discover cause-and-effect relationships. The use of authentic materials helps learners with practice decoding (Swaffar, 1985) and become more observant. Through repeated exposure to real examples in authentic texts learners master the target language on a higher level than just 'small talk'. With this in mind, it should be emphasized that literature is essential for the development of language proficiency since it provides rich authentic materials for language learners (Elliott, 1990).

Simplified texts are designed to teach particular new language materials, for that reason they should make language more accessible (Young, 1999). However, due to a lower level of linguistic skills of their authors compared to famous writers, as well as their – often – primitive contents, they limit deep processing and hinder the development of language awareness. Language learners of upper intermediate and higher levels cannot become effective users of the target language unless they are exposed to operation of language in literary texts. The concentration and motivation of language learners increase when authentic (including literary) literary materials are used in the classroom (Peacock, 1997). As learners immerse into literary texts and create meaning, learning becomes more enjoyable for them (on condition that their reading skills level and vocabulary stock is sufficient).

Literature places emphasis on the knowledge of language and its effective use (Hall, 2005). Learners endeavor to decode the messages in a literary text, and they raise reactions to the language aspects in it. Learners then engage in interpreting the text and finally they strive to use the language items they have learnt in the text (Zyngier & Fialho, 2010). Moreover, literary encounter is a perfect opportunity to become aware of how vocabulary and structures are linked with each other meaningfully. The experience of recognizing different uses of language in context enable learners to produce better written and oral language output.

The successful use of language for communication is essential in language learning. Well-selected literary texts (with simultaneously natural, contemporary and rich language) are excellent models for language learners for their significance in providing them comprehensible input. Collie and Slater (1987) argue that language and literature can work together "to let the student derive the benefits of communicative and other activities for language improvement within the context of suitable works of literature" (p.10). Language learners become cognizant of linguistic features through constant exposure to comprehensible input (Alvstad & Castro, 2009). In addition, dealing with real examples in literary texts enables learners to enhance their language awareness. Learners become aware of how language features are interacted in an aesthetic intention in a text, which may awaken their desire to apply the same strategies during communication.

Literary texts are motivating and inspiring in language pedagogy (Durant, 1995). They help learners explore language forms and communicative functions because a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures are connected to each other in numerous ways in them. With this aspect, literary texts place language learners in authentic contexts in which learners are at advantage to develop their language awareness. The concept of language awareness is characterized by the understanding of language aspects and functions (Carter, 2003).

Additionally, the supportive role of literature in cultural development is worthy of concern. Literature includes universal themes and global topics that are common to many people and cultures; for that reason, it is an ideal tool to portray culture and its people and it introduces to learners human experiences, thoughts and feelings. Learners, through reading literature, promote understanding of the target culture and develop tolerance towards it (Weber-Feve, 2009). In the process of reading literature, language learners engage in interpreting the meaning that provides them a medium through which they develop their critical thinking (Weist, 2004). Lasagabaster (1999) states that literature is an enormous source for the development of interpretative and critical thinking skills. Learners try to form meaning and draw inferences from the text; hence they not only deepen their understanding, but also develop their imagination. Literary texts are useful sources to learn language from the viewpoint of rich and beautiful language, depth of thought, creative approach, critical thinking, stimulating debate and discussions, etc.

The use of literature in the language classroom is conducive to language learning due to the fact that learners constantly encounter with comprehensible input that may maximize their language proficiency (Shanahan, 1997). The provision of authentic literary texts to language learners provides them multiple chances to

notice language functions in context. Through repeated exposure to literary texts learners will have a chance to balance form and meaning, so that they focus both on linguistic form and communicative competence. In other words, learners combine language knowledge and language practice by working with literary texts.

Thus, there has been certain controversy in the past and recent years concerning the application of fiction / non-fiction and authentic / non-authentic texts. Some researchers (Nematollahi & Maghsoudi, 2015) found that none of them has priority in the development of reading skills. Others believe that literary texts are more useful than non-fiction texts (Topping, 2014). Still others (Zainal & Baskeran, n.d.) state that literary authentic texts are least useful. As there is no consensus on the issue, the goal of this paper is to contribute to a certain degree to clarifying this problem.

In essence, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What differences in authentic literary and simplified texts are found in language proficiency development?
- 2) Will language learners who are exposed to authentic literary materials score significantly higher than those who are exposed to simplified texts?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Aim**

Language learners receive simplified input through simplified texts which are syntactically, phonologically and lexically modified from authentic texts or created by the textbook author for teaching certain language materials. The effectiveness of linguistically sanitized texts is a controversial issue in the language classroom. As language learners are not exposed to massive amounts of comprehensible input, they do not achieve sufficient amount of language proficiency development. Authentic texts, on the other hand, are written to fulfill a social purpose for native speakers. The use of literary works as authentic texts in the language classroom enables learners to delve into different text-types. When learners are engaged with different uses of language at different linguistic levels, they will discover language features and use these items to develop their language proficiency. The present study attempts to focus on the difference between the use of authentic texts and simplified texts in language learning development and reveal that authentic texts make difference in the development of language proficiency.

#### **3.2 Participants**

This study was conducted in an English Language Teaching undergraduate program at Ishik University, Iraq that involved instruction in the description and comprehension of reading texts. Each class had 20 students who were randomly selected and a total of 40 (25 females, 15 males) senior students took part in the study. According to

placement test, they were Upper-Intermediate level students. They accepted to be part of research, also the permission from administration was obtained to hold the experiment. The participants met three hours in a week and the study lasted for eight weeks. After obtaining information for the study, the same instructor taught both groups but different materials were employed. While Group 1 (control) used simplified, both fiction and non-fiction materials (texts created for the purpose of foreign language teaching), students in Group 2 (experimental) used authentic literary texts.

### 3.3 Educational Materials

*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (2003) was used for the experimental group and the reading samples used for the control group were selected from *Even More True Stories: An Intermediate Reader* by Sandra Heyer (1992) and *What a World* by Milada Broukal (2004), which included simplified texts for language learners. In both groups the analysis of the texts under study included reading, vocabulary and grammar exercises, as well as reading-based listening, speaking, and writing, and pure reading activities.

### 3.4 Research Design

In both groups, the analysis of the texts under study included reading, vocabulary and grammar exercises, as well as reading-based listening, speaking, and writing, and pure reading activities. The students had progress tests every week, thus totally eight tests were held for each group. The tests were prepared by the researcher from the texts each group studied. Then they were piloted in groups of the same age and language level, to provide reliability and validity. The tests contained grammar and vocabulary components, each consisting of 25 questions. The participants were allowed 50 minutes to complete 50 questions in each test in which the scores were given out of 100. The tests included multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions. Same tests were used for both groups (they were held simultaneously).

The data collected from the tests were analyzed to reveal the influences of authentic literary and simplified fiction and non-fiction materials on language learning. The proficiency development of learners in both groups was measured based on the scores the students had in the tests. The means and standard deviations for all exams were calculated with SPSS 16. This case under investigation includes both quantitative and qualitative data.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis for tests

	Group 1 (Simplified)	Group 2 (Authentic)
Tests	Cronbach alpha	Cronbach alpha
Test 1	.833	.833
Test 2	.833	.940
Test 3	.765	.950

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Test 4	.785	.963
Test 5	.765	.975
Test 6	.785	.986
Test 7	.787	.987
Test 8	.789	.989

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SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to conduct reliability analysis in the present study. A reliability coefficient of .70 is an acceptable value for Cronbach alpha. The table shows that all reliability coefficients for all tests are higher than .70.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

The data in the present study included the scores of eight tests the participants had throughout the study. A comparison of the test results showed which type of text was more successful for the development of language skills.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Tests

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	Group 1		Group 2	
	M	SD	M	SD
Test 1	70	9.84	68	10.14
Test 2	72	8.96	72	9.96
Test 3	68	10.24	74	9.48
Test 4	70	9.86	80	9.74
Test 5	72	8.62	84	8.84
Test 6	74	9.64	88	10.26
Test 7	74	10.12	94	9.82
Test 8	76	9.74	96	9.68

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Table 1 presents means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for all the tests in both groups. Initially Group 1 and Group 2 had almost the same level of language skills (mean results were 70 and 68, respectively). SD between 8 and 10 shows that both groups were rather homogenous. However, Group 1 which was exposed to

simplified materials did not achieve real improvement in the test results (70 → 76 = by 6 points or 8.6%), while Group 2, which was exposed to authentic literary texts, did (68 → 96=by 28 points or 41.2%).

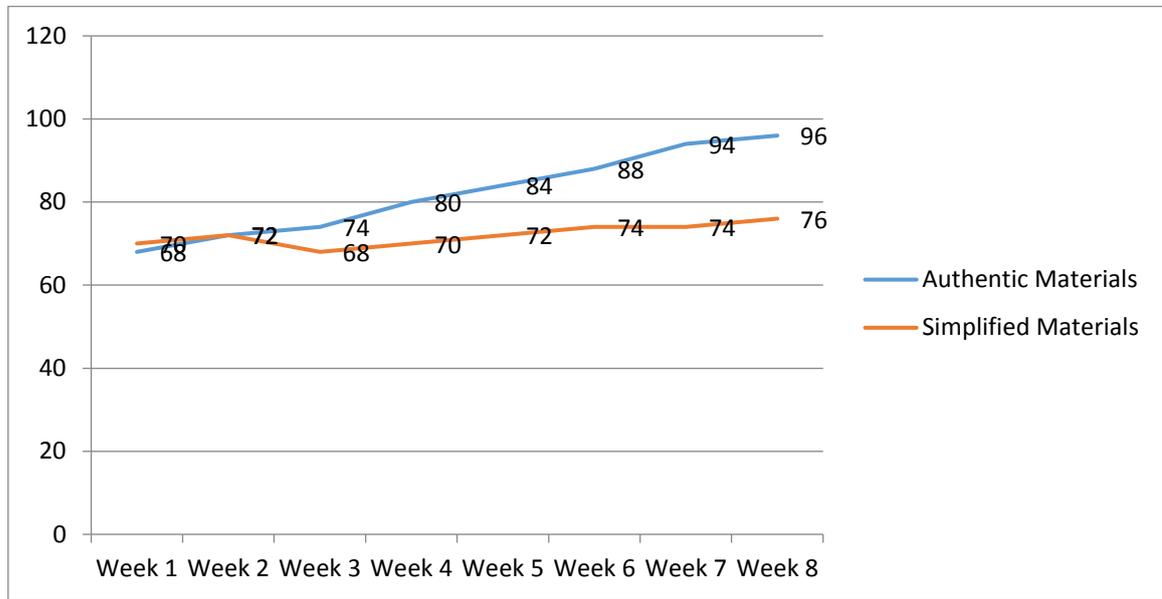


Figure 1: Mean scores for all learners

Figure 1 visually reveals that the test scores the students had in Group 2 are higher than the scores Group 1 had. To find out, whether the difference of the results obtained by the two groups was statistically significant, a paired-sample T-test was carried out with the help of SPSS 16.

Table 3: Paired sample t-test

Pairs	t	df	P-Value
Pair 1 test 1-test 2 Group 1	-5.514	19	.001*
Pair 2 test 2-test 3 Group 1	-4.418	19	.210
Pair 3 test 3-test 4 Group 1	-6.961	19	.189
Pair 4 test 4-test 5 Group 1	-5.389	19	.189
Pair 5 test 5-test 6 Group 1	-6.917	19	.097
Pair 6 test 6-test 7 Group 1	-4.157	19	.087

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Pair 7 test 7-test 8 Group 1	-7.415	19	.074
Pair 8 test 1-test 2 Group 2 19	-8.654	19	.000*
Pair 9 test 2-test 3 Group 2 19	-7.862	19	.001*
Pair 10 test 3-test 4 Group 2 19	-9.234	19	.000*
Pair 11 test 4-test 5 Group 2 19	-8.965	19	.000*
Pair 12 test 5-test 6 Group 2 19	-9.872	19	.000*
Pair 13 test 6-test 7 Group 2 19	-7.864	19	.000*
Pair 14 test 7-test 8 Group 2 19	-8.612	19	.001*

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\*Significant at  $p < .05$

The paired sample t-test showed that initially there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups' results. It also revealed a statistically significant increase between the Group 2 test results. However, in Group 1, except for the difference between test 1 and test 2, the t-test did not reveal any statistically important growth between test results in Group 1.

#### 4. Discussion

Results indicate that students scored higher results during the experiment (increased by 28 points or 41.2%) when authentic literary materials were used in the language classroom. Although the means for both groups do not show significant difference in the second week (which is natural due to a short time period), starting with the third week it becomes evident that the means of the students' results in the experimental group increased significantly from test to test, while it was not so in the control group. The results of the study suggest that the use of authentic literary texts is more useful in language learning. These results coincide with the researches viewed above that support the application of literary texts for teaching upper-intermediate level language learners (Alvstad & Castro, 2009; Barrette et al, 2010; Hall, 2005; Nematollahi & Maghsoudi, 2015; Topping, 2014; Weber-Feve, 2009; Zyngier, & Fialho, 2010).

#### 5. Conclusion

The underlying idea is that literature is a resource that can be employed in language learning for the development of upper-intermediate level EFL learners reading skills. Compared to simplified texts, authentic materials which can be provided by literary texts create an environment for language learners where language awareness can be developed to reach native-like levels of mastering the target language. Literary texts are rich in

grammatical and lexical form, which endows learners to notice different uses of language. The above discussion suggests that the use of authentic materials compared with simplified texts effectively helps language learners with the development of their reading and generally language skills. The experimental study held confirms this conclusion.

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