Title of Paper: **BOOK ART ACTIVITY AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS AND CREATIVITY**

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Abstract: This paper suggests an innovative activity which requires students to read a literary work, analyze and interpret it, and later transform it into a tangible creative product. This boosts students’ language, thinking and creativity skills. First, the benefits of using literature in the language classroom are reviewed. Then, suggestions about preparing and implementing a *book art* activity are provided. The article ends with depicting the possible positive impact of the activity on students’ learning progress and on their attitude to learning a foreign language.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, literature, creativity

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Benefits of Using Literature in the Language Classroom

Using literature for developing skills in foreign languages (FL) has been a trend for an extended period of time. Looking back at the history of FL teaching methodology, we can find a number of ways that literary works were used in the classroom. For instance, in the grammar translation method literary works were used as samples of language use and correct grammar structures that would also conveniently teach a selection of vocabulary. This method remained largely passive as it focused only on the input stage of language learning. In the era of communicative language teaching, literature is seen as a tool for developing learners’ communicative competence by means of responding to the text and focusing on student output, i.e., interpreting the author’s ideas, “debating” with the author, emitting opinions and further researching the topic. Supporters of the integration of critical thinking into language teaching see literature as a valuable tool for developing learners’ abilities to analyze and evaluate. Educators who advocate learner-centered approach strive to use literature in the learning process, as it involves students emotionally and therefore makes learning meaningful for everyone. Among other advantages of using literature in the classroom, practitioners mention cultural enrichment and exposure to otherness. Any book can provide this, either with its content or through the style of writing. In this respect, “literature is here to stay, for the time being at least, and particularly in the FL classroom” (Sell, 2005) as it is a valuable tool for the development of both language and thinking skills.

The interest in literature as a teaching resource can be seen from the growing number of publications on theoretical foundations and practical applications of using literary works in the classroom. Literature offers an abundant source of ideas (Lazar, 1993) for teachers and should not remain the exclusive privilege of university literary studies. Another excellent example is the integration of levelled readers and original fiction for learners, offered by all major publishing houses, into curricula. In fact, some studies have found that the divide between language and literature studies can be detrimental to the development of integrated skills (Cimarosti, 2015). The teaching of English through literature and creative occupations linked to it have had a favorable effect on students’ culturally-biased difficulties in connecting with each other, apart from teaching them the essentials of language mastery (Faktorovich, 2016).

Nowadays, technologies and social media in particular have changed the way people read. This problem is especially urgent with university students. They do not seem to spend enough time reading literature, and when they do read, they seem to have a shallower understanding of texts and their backgrounds. In this sense, a new and multifaceted approach is necessary in order to reestablish reading habits. Students need support and encouragement in their first readings. This can be done through a redevelopment of the ways we present and explore literary texts (Wales, Saito, & Teranishi, 2015) with our students. Some have done this through the reading of children’s literature (Lutge & Bland, 2013) in order to get more mature students to regress to a stage where the habit of reading would be easier to form. After all, it is in our formative years that our positive reading experience sticks with us. Others have focused on simplified versions of literary classics based on various learner levels. In all cases, however, instructors aim for an increased interest in reading which, in turn, will push students to read more. This is because extensive
reading helps students develop their imagination, broadens their outlook and enhances their language skills. When we look at the literature on the topic, we find that teachers often look for ideas to solve the problems of concentration and staying focused for longer periods on a single book.

**Book Art Methodology**

This paper explores the methodology of one such solution. Called *book art*, this activity aims to attract students to reading and support them through a longer period of reading, analyzing and reconstructing a literary text. The main aim is to read in English. This activity may actually encourage some fearful readers to open a lengthy and complex book for the first time. The secondary (and usually more attractive to students) aim is to explore the reader's artistic side, seeking inspiration from ideas generated from the reading as well as from the individual’s previous experience, culture and background. The reader will take writing, which itself is a form of art, one step further and transform its message into visual art. This is how the activity will successively focus on linguistic input (from the reading) and output (production of artwork). This makes it particularly adaptable to language teaching. In addition, it develops creativity and imagination and allows students to innovate through the transformation of previous knowledge into something new. In many cases, it will also lead to critical thinking and more advanced analysis if the students decide to explore the text’s backgrounds, history and sociocultural implications.

This activity is not targeted at any specific age group of students. It can, therefore, be applied across different educational institutions and across all levels of education. It is very suitable for institutions where diversity predominates in all its forms. In terms of teaching-learning process organization, the activity is mostly appropriate for extra-curricular work. However, depending on the nature of the course the students are taking, there is a possibility of integrating it as a para-curricular project or a more elaborate final course project.

There are a number of important steps to follow in order to launch the *book art* activity successfully. First, students need to meet with their instructor to agree on their book choice. It is very important to understand the student's motivation for reading a certain book and to avoid culturally sensitive topics in case of a diverse student population. The genre and theme of the book may depend on the students’ personality, likes and dislikes. It is often a good idea to have an interview and a discussion with the student before suggesting a certain text. Indeed, “the key to success in using literature in ESL class seems to rest in the literary works that are selected” (McKay, 1986, p. 193). The selection may vary depending on the personality of readers and their life experiences in general. Suggesting the right book for the right student is a task that should be taken responsibly. Therefore, book selection is considered an important stage in the activity and a key to its success.

The issue of book selection is particularly sensitive in the context of Middle Eastern countries. Rules and regulations of specific countries should be taken into account when drafting the list of books to be offered to students. It is evident that unbiased books should be selected. They should not contain any apparent sensitive issues and should exclude
politics, religion, alternative sexual orientations, racism, etc. This may prove a challenging task as many Western literatures thrive in times politico-religious or social turmoil. However, it should be noted that historical backgrounds may not be necessarily relevant to Middle Eastern students, and, therefore, some books might in fact be appropriate. Such is the case of Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, for example. In spite of the limitations, the reading list can be quite extensive and comprise adventure stories (e.g., *Around the World in 80 Days* by Jules Verne; *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl) or novels about common human values (e.g., *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway; *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery). Literature for children from the Victorian Era can also be a suitable fit. Frances Hodgson Burnett is a good example of an author for such contexts.

After the book is selected, the student may need steadfast encouragement to read it. In the course of reading the student might face difficulties. What can help is keeping a journal, noting down important passages or ideas to keep record of the reading process and also to practice using proper citation rules. This stage can even improve spelling and grammar. Meetings should be planned to discuss all aspects of the book: the message, context, author, symbols, metaphors, etc. The student should also be encouraged to transpose the story into potential real situations. Here the instructor can help with questions such as, “What would you do if you were in this character’s shoes?” Each of these topics can be included in the journal. At this stage many students may opt for more creative approaches to their journal by gathering items that remind them of the text or organizing the whole in scrapbook form. This should be encouraged. This intersection between journal writing and artistic creativity (O’Connell, Dyment, & Smith, 2015) will help students demonstrate their practical understanding of language and integrate it into a broader, more concrete experience of English.

At the final stage, the students are asked to present their understanding of the main idea of the book. There are several ways of completing this stage. Students may choose to take photographs representing a scene or scenes from the book. This is probably one of the easiest media that is also immediately accessible to students, as it can be done with a mobile phone and even via applications such as Instagram. Students may also opt for a collage, a painting, or an art installation. At this stage, the students are welcome to physically integrate the book, or parts of the text itself, into their artwork. In other words, students will transform the verbal message into something visually and physically tangible by putting all the meanings and feelings the text evoked for them into a new object. In terms of artistic choices, students can be presented with various examples of illustrations or sculptures. This can be done in a lecture format or, if time allows, can become a part of the students’ own investigation into their task. Bearing in mind that the activity could be environmentally friendly, students may be encouraged to use recyclable materials. For example, if students have decided to present their ideas in the form of an installation, they might be advised to make use of everyday objects like used stationery, utensils, or fabric, or to recycle everyday items.
Book Art Impact

The most interesting outcome of this activity is the mixing of the arts and letters, and their interaction on a background that is culturally determined by the student’s unique outlook. The activity can be potentially exhibited in the form of an artistic set-up with copies of the books available in a reading corner along with the reading journals next to the relevant artwork. Such a display in a school setting may also have a favorable effect on other students in terms of how they perceive books and reading. Furthermore, it will create a forum for the generation of discussions on literary texts. This can be carried out in English to further strengthen students’ communication skills.

Going back to the advantages of using literature in FL teaching (see “Benefits of Using Literature in the Language Classroom,” above), it can be hypothesized that the book art activity can lead to a number of positive outcomes. Its role in developing language skills such as reading, writing and speaking cannot be underestimated. The exposure of language in the process of reading a book allows a learner to memorize new words and to see examples of vocabulary usage, to get familiarized with diverse sentence patterns, and to develop important strategies of guessing the meaning of words from the context. In addition, literary works involve language learners emotionally. They associate themselves with the content of the literary work, reflect on it, imagine the situations that are described in the book, and eventually get inspired due to the feelings that the book fuels readers with.

Many researchers agree that the leading purpose of using literature in the language classroom is to develop students’ creative skills, to foster what Koutsompou (2015) called “personal growth.” In the book art activity, FL teachers may even go one step further, as they do not just ask students to visualize and interpret the content of the book, but encourage them to change the perspective of viewing life by transforming the book into another form of art. Undeniably, this activity can improve students’ perception of their performance as well as their creativity by introducing a change in the usual practices they adopt when approaching literature in general.

In our opinion, there is also impact on the non-participating students, i.e., those who see the outcomes of the participating students’ work. They might express the wish to read a book that is represented in an unusual way. Their interest can be piqued by the features of the artwork as well as by the journal of the reading experience. The language and message of the artwork and the journal often attract attention first because of the visual immediacy. Second, non-participating students might have a different perception or interpretation of the book. For example, each reader has his/her expectations to see a certain scene or character portrayed in a certain way and notices particular details in the text. A difference of perception might be termed as surprising, which is a valuable source for discussions and further cooperation between the students. In this sense, the presence of the artwork encourages the onset of literary analysis and critique in the discourse of students with no prior experience of it.

Besides the benefits that have already been mentioned, this activity contributes to the development of experience-based education and free learning environments, where
students can be allowed to explore and innovate on their own, with the instructor taking on the role of mentor, rather than being the sole source of knowledge or authority.

**Conclusion**

This activity can be considered as creative, original and innovative. It encourages a new way of looking at writing: as a creative process that mixes different genres and fields of study. In this sense, the activity can be developed further with the introduction of literature from scientific areas of study and the use of textbooks as support.

My hypothesis is that this activity will generate a very encouraging absence of negative peer perceptions and a general positive attitude towards all the resulting products. I also assume a strong involvement from students and a tendency to associate themselves with the content of the literary work or the content of the art exhibit. Interestingly, *book art* has a potential of encouraging not only reading and reflection on literary texts but also the production of secondary texts or meta-literature, and fosters community spirit and cohesiveness. Therefore, the *book art* activity can be applied in FL classroom as a useful tool to boost learners’ communicative competence in a FL and to stimulate their creativity.

**References**


