# Learning Language through Literature: A Study of Maugham's "The Luncheon" and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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***Abstract:*** *This study shows how literature can be used as a tool to develop learners' knowledge in English. Most of the courses in the Departments of English in Bangladesh are literature-oriented and the teaching and testing systems mainly cover some thematic and philosophical aspects. This paper aims at exploring the effectiveness of learning language through literature, locating the different distinctive linguistic features tightly patterned in a literary text. As literature does not constitute a particular type of language, the effects of literary language and the real life use of it in texts allow the language learners to trace how different linguistic rules are embedded in, and how the learners can develop language skills, unveiling the inseparable bridge between language and literature. This paper, therefore, is a linguistic experimentation on Maugham's "The Luncheon" and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to demonstrate how they can be used as teaching materials to enrich students' communicative and linguistic competence in English. This study also focuses on practical uses of some figurative languages such as dramatic monologue, humor, irony, metaphor, paradox, satire, and symbol as well as some idioms and phrases which may help the learners gain a lot of exposure in English.*

***Keywords:*** *Literary language, linguistic competence, SLA/EFL, language skills*

## Introduction

It is well known that there is an overlapping relation between literature and language. Literary texts are enriched with varieties of language, which give learners a scope to learn and use them in communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching pays importance to the learners' ability to use language profitably according to the circumstances. Furthermore, a literary text is a living organism which offers the learners a chance to sort out different linguistic features that collaboratively make the language coherent. As Collie and Slater (1987) have suggested, "in reading literary texts, students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on" (p. 4). Since literature, especially the short story and poetry, motivates the learners linguistically and culturally, the learners practically experience interaction and the art of using literary language in practical life. It is reality that in the literature-based classrooms "the reader is placed in an active interactional role, working with and making sense of the (literary) language" (Brumfit, 1986, p. 15). This study will give an insight into how

these linguistic factors occur in a literary text and how the pedagogic principles are implemented in a communicative language classroom.

Most of the teachers of our country do not consider literature as a great source for learning language. In the class, they want to establish that literary language and our daily language are different, so we should not use them in our practical communicative events. In this connection, Lazar (2002) says, "Our main task in the classroom is to pinpoint how far literary language deviates from ordinary language" (p. 3). So the teachers always emphasize aesthetic and philosophical sides of literature and give tests to the learners on thematic and stylistic aspects of literary texts. It is, however, time to think positively about learning language through literature. It is widely accepted today that literature can be used to transmit the culture of a target language in SLA/EFL classrooms. "The advantages of using literary texts for language activities are that they offer a wide range of styles and registers; they are open to multiple interpretations and hence provide excellent opportunities for classroom discussions," say Duff and Maley (1990, p. 6). As literature deals with the culture of a particular speech community and pattern of language of that speech community, the learners get the syntactic features of that speech community. So literature helps the learners to develop their writing skills. According to Collie and Slater (1987), "the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas are presented at many levels of difficulty in literature" (p. 5).

Among all the literary genres, the short story is a very convenient tool to teach and learn language. Short stories delineate real life situations and present grief, enjoyment, and feelings lucidly. This is one of the most significant media for learning a language. As the content of a short story is short, simple, and touching, readers read it with great enthusiasm and finish within a very short time, usually understanding the meaning easily. Short stories are more creative and challenging so that the learners have the scope to accept this challenge. A short story is always mysterious and the conclusion is not satisfactory so the learners are tempted to study short stories closely in an attempt to complete the unfinished issue. Multidisciplinary learners can use short stories to learn a language due to its universality. Short stories can be selected more frequently in our syllabi at any level (secondary, higher secondary, and tertiary) for teaching and learning a language. For this paper, we have taken Somerset Maugham's short story "The Luncheon" as a text to learn language. We will analyze this text from various angles to get our objectives. In "The Luncheon," words are not used anomalously but rather used to give a literary effect.

Like the short story, poetry is also another very important genre of literature to be used in the SLA/EFL classroom to learn language. As poetry deals with metaphorical language, the learners can learn about the aesthetic sides of language. By studying poetry, learners practically learn the basic rules of grammar, enrich vocabulary, and understand sentence patterns: "In the poem there are a number of different words connected with certain ideas or images" (Lazar, 1993, p. 125). The learners achieve profound analytical abilities, cultural background, and become capable of using figures of speech like similes, metaphors, symbols, irony, personification, paradox, and so on. According to Maley and Moulding (1985), "If carefully selected, poems can open up themes which are common to us whatever our cultural background, and can thus act as a powerful stimulus to the students' own reflective thinking, which will lead to more mature and fruitful group discussion" (p. 135). In this study, we have taken T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a text to learn language. It is interesting for teaching as its content and form are pedagogically potential. Since this poem deals with the aspects of modernism like decadence, disbelief, loss of values, identity crisis, disintegration, demoralization, restlessness, indecision, and nakedness, the learners read it seriously. This study will give an outlook about how the linguistic factors occur in this poem and how SLA principles are implemented in a classroom setting.

### The Role of Literature in Language Learning

English language and literature are very closely related to each other. Literature is one of the best sources of learning basic language skills as well as improving linguistic competencies. Povey (1972) asserts, "Literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax" (cited in McKay, 1982, p. 529). English today is taught as a global language, for the purpose of multilevel communication. It makes sense, therefore, to choose literature from as wide a range of sources as possible. "In many countries around the world, literature is highly valued. For

this reason, students of English may experience a real sense of achievement at tackling literary materials in the classroom," according to Lazar (1993, p. 15). The main purpose of English teaching today is to enable our students to use English for practical purposes – to form personal relationships, to run a business, to know the culture of a particular speech community, to engage in further studies, and so on. Lazar says "Literature can provide students with access to the culture of the people whose language they are studying" (1993, p. 16). To be successful in an SLA/EFL program, literature can play a very significant role. The scope for practicing speaking and writing in English are limited in different countries of the world due to the variety of settings and lack of facilities. In that context, literature can be used as appropriate material to practice English. "Literature may provide a particularly appropriate way of stimulating this acquisition, as it provides meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language" (Lazar, 1993, p. 17). In a classroom setting, the students can learn English properly as it is a formal setting and the teacher plays a significant role as facilitator. Using a literary text and ensuring participatory methods, the teacher can teach language with enjoyment. Here, the students have an opportunity to listen and speak properly:

> The reading of literature then becomes an important way of supplementing the inevitably restricted input of the classroom. And if recorded literary material is available, then students can acquire a great deal of new language by listening to it. Within the classroom itself, the use of literary texts is often a particularly successful way of promoting activities where students need to share their feelings and opinions, such as discussions and group work (Lazar, 1993, p. 17).

Literature plays an important role in increasing language awareness among the learners. Using literature, the students can be more sensitive regarding the overall features of English. To develop the ability to interpret, learners can use literary texts. As indirect, allegorical, and hypothetical aspects are available in literature, the students get the scope to make inferences from the meaning of the text and try to interpret them.

> This is because literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/ learner is actively involved in 'teasing out' the unstated implications and assumption of the text. In a poem for example, a word may take on a powerful figurative meaning beyond its fixed dictionary definition (Lazar, 1993, p. 19).

There are a lot of advantages to studying literature with a view to learning language. Penny Ur lists some advantages of using literature to learn English language:

- It (literature) can be enjoyable and motivating
- It can widen student's horizons by providing knowledge about the culture which is the background to the text
- It encourages empathetic, critical, creative thinking
- It raises awareness of different human situations and conflicts
- Literature study has value in itself, like any other school subject
- It provides examples of different styles of writing, and representations of various authentic uses of the language
- It is a good basis for vocabulary expansion
- It develops reading skills
- It can provide an excellent starting point for discussion or writing. (1996, pp. 223-224)

It is very clear that learners can learn language through literature with pleasure, and they will be introduced to language variations due to geographical settings. On the other hand, they will be able to understand the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic aspects of the text. The students get a clear idea regarding synchronic study and diachronic study through studying literature. Apart from these, literature can help learners know about cultural variation, be a critical thinker, achieve competences in reading and writing skills, and become capable of distinguishing between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation of sentences used in literary text. As Collie and Slater explain it (1987), "Though the world of literature is a created one, it depicts contextually vivid characters from varied social backgrounds. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors" (p. 4).

Teachers should use literary texts in the classroom with a view to teaching basic language and linguistic competences. Through literature, the learners get motivation, stimulation, enthusiasm, fluency, and language awareness. To show the essentiality of literature in the classroom setting, Lazar (1993) lists some reasons:

- it is very motivating
- it is authentic material
- it has general education value
- it is found in many syllabuses
- it helps students to understand another culture
- it is a stimulus for language acquisition
- it develops students' interpretative abilities
- students enjoy it and it is fun
- it is highly valued and has a high status
- it expands students' language awareness
- it encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings. (pp. 15-16)

Formalism gives insight about the language of literature. According to Abrams (1999), "Formalism views literature primarily as a special mood of language, and proposes a fundamental opposition between the literary (or poetical) use of language and the ordinary, 'practical' use of language" (pp. 102-103). So it proves literature uses both literary and practical language to make an organic whole, which indeed offers students a lot of exposure in that language. Peter Brooker (2003) claims about formalism, "the movement's attentions were focused on the formal specificity of literary works" (p. 104). And this formal specificity is expressed through language where "form" and "content" become almost the same. This form and content of a literary text – a story or a poem – give an intelligibility about the language pattern which gives shape to a person's thought and imagination.

Actually, language is the vehicle for the growth of literature or vice versa. The concept of language is not a separate or isolated entity; likewise literature is impossible without the weaving of language. From that standpoint, the relationship between language and literature is inseparable – one is impossible without the other. To elaborate on the relationship between language and literature, Dr. Askari (2011) explains:

> To weigh up the importance of language and literature in context seems to be a chicken and egg situation. Despite knowing full well that language is the vehicle for literature, it remains a vexed question to determine whether language works as a catalyst all by itself for the growth and development of literature or vice versa. As a matter of fact, language is never an isolated entity, self-born and self-developed. Nor is it a readily available tree in the fullest blossom from which people pluck flowers and weave wreaths of literature with considerable ease. It is rather a stream that keeps on flowing with different currents and undercurrents. These 'currents' and 'undercurrents' do not always spring from the stream itself. They rather come from other sources and are harmoniously assimilated with it, and thus enrich the language. This is true in the case of all modern major languages in the world that they are considerably nourished by the literatures they produce.

Literary texts possess the ability to involve the learners in language learning contexts where learners are exposed to various instances of literary languages as well as various writing styles and sentence constructions. Furthermore, literary texts arrange such a situation which foster learners' creativity when learners use them to perform different drills in the language classroom.  In this context, Barman and Basu (1996) quote ideas from Hirvela:

- Conventional texts used in ELT, which are usually only information based, come from no particular context. In activities with these texts, the learners are supposed to take the role of a passive learner. Literary texts, on the other hand, encourage the students to identify with or react against the characters that attract their attention. The learners become more active, involved and engaged while learning the language through literature.

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- Literature stimulates the learners to solve mysteries, answer questions, engage in different types of creative activity that foster deeper connections.

- Literature also has many instances of "deviant language" usages .These can be used as resource for the teacher to expose the students to a variety of text types and different social and functional uses of language.

- By reading literature, students are exposed to various cultures as well as various styles and levels of English.

- The imaginative properties of the literary texts foster the students' academic literacy skills, which is not so easy if a non-literary text is used as the language teaching material. (pp. 247-248).

**Developing Language Skills and Dissection of Linguistic Features from "The Luncheon"**

To learn language from Maugham's "The Luncheon," we discuss the use of words, phrases, and sentence patterns of the text. We will analyze it from SLA and linguistic point of view. On some occasions, words are used through a process of combination and selection which are the Saussurian "syntagm" and "paradigm." Syntagm, a combination supported by linearity, claims words to make a sentence because they are chained together (Varshney, 1995, p. 32). In "The Luncheon," the lines "She waved him aside with an airy gesture… And my heart sank" (13-14),the relationship is restricted to certain orders. A term in the above line acquires its value because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes and follows it, or to both. And paradigm, contrastive or choice relationships, presses that words that have something in common, are associated in the memory, resulting in groups marked by diverse relations. Here the use of "sank" unconsciously calls to our mind a host of other words – descend, drooped, afraid, frightened. But the writer is using "sank" instead of those.

Cohesion, the grammatical and lexical relationship within a text, is superbly handled by the writer giving anaphoric and cataphoric references, and sometimes ellipsis/substitution and conjunction. As McCarthy (1991) puts it, "Spoken and written discourses display grammatical connections between individual clauses and utterances. For our purposes, these grammatical links can be classified under three broad types: reference, ellipsis/substitution, and conjunction" (p. 35). The following passage of "The Luncheon" gives the scope to identify some of the features of cohesion mentioned above:

> "No, no. I never eat anything for luncheon. Just a bite, I never want more than that, and I eat that more as an excuse for conversation than anything else. I couldn't possibly eat anything more, unless they had some of those giant asparagus. I should be sorry to leave Paris without having some of them." (13)

The anaphoric reference, looking backward, is made by "them" in the last line, which indicates "giant asparagus" in the earlier sentence. Cataphoric reference, looking forward, is made when the "little fish" becomes "salmon." "Just a bite" is an example of ellipsis which is used instead of the full sentence "I eat just a bite." Besides these, there is a relation among giant asparagus, eating, and the luncheon itself, which shows the lexical grouping built in the text. And these cohesive devices make the world of this text semantically coherent. Another extension of literature is that it is a good source for increasing vocabulary and mastering different grammatical structures and idiomatic expressions, which second language learners of English develop from it to have sound expertise in English language. "The Luncheon" is a good source of learning and mastering different idiomatic expressions as well – keep body and soul together, bill of fare, by all means, go on, take to task, walk out, make up one's mind, how time does fly! Furthermore, students can develop and practice various exquisite words, e.g.,"succulent," "appetising," "ingratiating," and so on in the proper context to help them become more fluent in English. Maugham's "The Luncheon" is also full of humor and irony which a learner can easily dissect and have an understanding regarding the issues. In "The Luncheon," the lady repeatedly says "I never anything eat for luncheon." But when the author asks her, "What would you like?" she replied, "My doctor won't let me drink anything but champagne" (13). The humor is also evident when the lady says, "Follow my example … and never eat more than one thing for luncheon" (13). Maugham has also used diverse superb expressions, such as "It was twenty years ago and I was living in Paris" (16). Sentences like "You ruin your palate by all the meat you eat," "My heart sank," "But I was flattered and I was too young to have learned to say 'no' to a woman" (11) give students a sound exposure to English.

Another important factor that influences second language acquisition is the particular setting that impacts learning outcomes. Actually, the setting of language learning is linked with the final level of proficiency. Ellis (1994) uplifted Gardener's socio-educational model that "explains how setting is related to proficiency – one of the primary goals of any social theory of L2 acquisition – by positing a series of intervening variables (attitudes, motivation, self-confidence)" (p. 238). As mentioned earlier, setting influences learning outcomes. Gardener claims that the formal language context results in linguistic outcomes and, likewise, an informal one culminates non-linguistic outcomes (p. 238). From this perspective, second language acquisition and learning is befittingly possible in a non-threatening environment congenial to any learning that Stephen Krashen in his "affective filter hypothesis" answers. The very first paragraph of "The Luncheon" – "I caught sight of her at the play and in answer to her beckoning I went over during the interval and sat down beside her. It was long since I had last seen her and if someone had mentioned her name I hardly think I would have recognized her. She addressed me brightly" (p. 11) – provides ample learning materials, e.g., phrase, long sentence construction, stylish expression, and so on. A teacher in a language classroom can get his or her students to practice more sentences identical to the mentioned structures and expressions in a non-threatening atmosphere. Indeed, students' practice in low affective filters results in ultimate level of L2 attainment.

**Developing Language Skills and Dissection of Linguistic Features from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"**

T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" provides wonderful learning materials that ease instructed second language acquisition. The poem is a compact composition where Eliot's mastery is well reflected in the subtle weaving of sentences, giving special importance to the grammaticalization, and thereby bringing a transition, in the structure of his poetic composition to symbolically incarnate the period in which he writes. Eliot's conscious use of preposition, relative clause, compound formation, images, and above all, punctuating devices is worth mentioning, for the teacher in a language classroom concerned, in an active drilling, can get help from the examples used in the poem while giving insight regarding the above mentioned linguistic items. From the following lines, a teacher can give his or her students some important input that can enable the learners to have an exposure to them in their practical life:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table; (6-8)
> …
> The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
> Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
> Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains … (20-24)

In line number 8, the idiomatic expression "spread out against the sky" gives the learner a scope to learn the phrase "spread out" and the use of a preposition like "against." From line 20 to 24, Eliot's use of relative clause, linguistically marked construction, imparts learners an occasion to master relative clause construction. A teacher in a language classroom can show how the relationship between "fog and that" is established and how the verb "rub" conforms to the antecedent. Apart from these, a teacher can bring an example of compounding like "window-panes" – a system of forming words. Actually, second language acquisition and learning, through the process of instructions, lays a lasting effect on the ultimate level of attainment. In this respect, Diane Larsen Freeman and Michael H. Long in *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research* cite the linguist Pavesi:

> the instructed group's superior performance derived not from formal SL instruction per se, but from the instructed learners' exposure to the more elaborated, more complex input of language used as the medium of instruction, i.e. from their exposure to what Ochs (1979) terms 'planned discourse.' Planned discourse has been documented as containing, among other things, a higher degree of grammaticalization (Givon, 1979), including a higher frequency of linguistically more marked constructions. (317)

## Conclusion

Teachers in language classrooms can make their students practice more sentences identical to the mentioned structures and expressions in a non-threatening atmosphere. Indeed, students' practice in low affective filters results in ultimate level of L2 acquisition. This study shows how English literature provides examples of different styles of writing – formal, informal and personal – and also representations of various authentic uses of the language. Along with this, the paper also shows how literature becomes a good resource for increasing word power and how it works as a springboard for exciting discussions.

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