# Literary Language in Development of L2 Competence

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## Abstract

Nowadays it is believed that language in daily communication rather than literary language should be the target of learning in L2 education. This is mainly because literary language is said to be uncommon in life. This paper reports on a study in which some Hong Kong ESL learners' English proficiency was re-examined through literary texts. These learners had reached intermediate or advanced levels of English prior to the study and were generally competent in daily English. However, many of them encountered difficulty in understanding literary language. Their proficiency in general English test could not match their performances in understanding literary works. The findings reveal that learners who are strong in general proficiency may not be good in understanding literary language. Lack of literary language in the curriculum results in a false and distorted picture about the learners' proficiency. Literary language helps upgrade L2 learners' real proficiency in the target language.

**Keywords:** literature, literary language, L2 proficiency, reading competence

## 1. Introduction

Although *literary language* is by and large understood as the language of literature, it is sometimes very confusing and controversial, especially if people think there is a kind of language unique to literature. Contrary to this, Brumfit and Carter (1986) contend, "*We believe that there is no such thing as literary language*. When we say this, we mean that we find it impossible to isolate any single or special property of language which is exclusive to a literary work. It does not mean we deny that language is *used* in ways which can be distinguished as literary" (p. 6, original emphasis). Nonetheless, many people believe that literary language is used by writers for writing works such as novels, dramas, lyrical and narrative poetry, and prose fiction. All these types of literary writing can be covered by the umbrella term 'literature'. In this paper, 'literature' refers to the products of creative literary writing, while 'literary language' should be interpreted as sentence structures, choice of words, ways of expression, and ways of structuring and organizing information in literary works as a whole. It may be noted that although *literary language* is authentic material, which is much desired in modern L2 education, it does have its characteristics. One obvious difference from everyday language lies in the fact that literary language is mainly in written form and therefore can be longer in structure while ordinary language in daily communication is oral in principle. For example, some literary works use flashback techniques, inverted forms or parallel and antithetical structures to describe characters, events and situations so that certain effects can be achieved. Charles Dickens' use of literary language is a fine illustration: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way --- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only." (*A Tale of Two Cities*, Chapter I: The Period by Charles Dickens, 1859). The seemingly self-contradictory pairs of sentences best describe the background of the story and lead readers to clearly realize the deep-rooted class conflicts in the then society and the complicated situations before the French Revolution. In spite of that, there is a much huge common core shared by literary language and ordinary plain language of communication, namely, both are authentic and used by native speakers: "literary texts embody the TL (target language) in authentic use and can provide insights into social and cultural dimensions of the country where it is spoken" (Pachler & Allford 2000, p. 238). It is widely held that knowledge about social norms and culture of the target

language is virtually essential to developing an L2 learner's communicative competence. Precisely on this point, literary language has its contribution to language learning. As is known, literary works are usually a mirror of reality, society and life. Therefore, literary language is full of social and cultural knowledge, with which an L2 learner can understand and use the target language more successfully in communication. It is not necessary that literary language reads unusual; instead, compared with ordinary language, literary language describes and expresses things "with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 4). This is because literary language is the achievement of the writers' artistic and creative use of ordinary language. They want to achieve some special effects in a way that is different from ordinary usage. So literary language can prompt readers to learn about the social and cultural knowledge and to realize the effects of language use. The comparison Cook (1996, pp. 163-164) made between a high-brow and a low-brow writings reveals how literary language and non-literary language differ when they are used to describe the same thing.

As for the role of literary language in the development of language knowledge and proficiency, many people regard it as positive. Some L2 teachers and researchers advocate the use of literary language to promote skills in the target language (Heath, 1993; Paran, 2008; Parkinson & Reid-Thomas, 2000; Rycik 1990; Stewart & Santiago, 2006; Wessels, 1991). Others think the application of literature a useful short-cut to intercultural understanding, an integral part of L2 learning (Byram, 2003; Hanauer, 2000). Collie and Slater's view is typical: "Literature helps extend the intermediate or advanced learner's awareness of the range of language itself. Literary language is not always that of daily communication, but it is special in its way. It is heightened: sometimes elaborate, sometimes marvelously simple yet, somehow, absolutely 'right'" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 5). However, if we take a look at the teaching materials in ESL or EFL classrooms, we will find that literary texts are very scarce, which leaves most students unfamiliar with literary language. This is partly because language teaching and learning have been mainly communication-orientated since the 1980s, particularly for the purpose of acquiring oral proficiency. One of the difficulties that confront teachers who try to stimulate students' interest in literary language is that literary language is "so often so light, not to say inconsequential, in paraphrasable content" (Widdowson, 1986). Some people mistakenly think that literary language does not have close connections to the daily use of the target language. It has often been thought that the study of literary English is little suited to the L2 learner's needs and the mastery of literary texts has little bearing on the learners' needs to understand or produce more functional written or spoken forms of language.

In order to provide empirical data on the usefulness of literary language in the L2 curriculum, this paper will report on a study conducted on small groups of ESL learners of intermediate and advanced levels. They were university year-one students of various majors. For the purpose of examining their ability to understand literary language after they gained the proficiency required for oral communication, they were invited to read some selected texts composed in literary language. The findings show that even subjects with high proficiency in ordinary language felt uncertain in dealing with literary language. Yet, in spite of the difficulties they encountered, almost all of them thought that the reading of literary texts was a positive experience, because the experiment brought to light their weaknesses in language knowledge, and all this could in turn facilitate their further learning.

## 2.1 The Study

### 2.1 The subjects and methods

The original design of the study was to have 10 groups, with three subjects in each, for the sake of convenient statistical analysis and comparison. Therefore, 30 students were contacted but, in the end, 27 students participated in the experiment. They had all passed the university entrance English test and became freshmen students. Based on their scores in the official entrance English test, they could be regarded as having intermediate to advanced proficiency in English. They were divided into nine teams, which were categorized into three levels based on their scores in the university entrance English test. This was for the purpose of testing whether the subjects with high proficiency could remain high and outperform their peers with lower proficiency when they dealt with literary language. The three levels were labeled H (High level), M (Middle level) and L (Low level). The nine teams were divided into three groups, with each group having an H team, an M team and an L team. The three H teams were called Group 1-H, Group 2-H and Group 3-H; the three M teams were Group 1-M, Group 2-M and Group 3-M; the three L teams were Group 1-L, Group 2-L and Group 3-L. Each group was regarded as an experimental unit and they would all be given the same reading tasks and tests.

Each time the subjects came in for the reading activities of the research project, they were given a piece of

literary work to read, such as a passage taken from D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* and a dialogue from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The reason why one piece of literary work was given at a time was that "a single literary work may make use of various text types (narrative, dialogue, etc.), encompass a range of registers (formal, slang, etc.) and move between different styles (ironic, impressionistic, etc.'' (Pachler & Allford, 2000, p. 240). Then the subjects had to complete some exercises designed for these reading excerpts, which included reading comprehension, identification of sentence components, analysis of designated sentence structures, selection of appropriate vocabulary, use of figures of speech, or imitation of samples to make up their own expressions. In total, they had six reading activities throughout four months, and after every two reading activities a test was administered. The literary texts and the tests selected for this study were well-connected in terms of the level of difficulty and logical sequence, as they were all chosen from the English course book *Proficiency in English Course* (Low, 1991).

2.2 *The results of the tests*

The results of the three tests are given below. The statistics include the means and standard deviations so that the subjects' average performance can be seen.

**Table 1: Results of Tests on Literary Language**

| | Test 1 | | Test 2 | | Test 3 | | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. | |
| Group 1-H | 77 | 3.07 | 72 | 3.10 | 69 | 5.20 | 72.7 |
| Group 1-M | 69 | 2.15 | 73 | 2.02 | 74 | 1.27 | 72.0 |
| Group 1-L | 63 | 1.76 | 65 | 4.63 | 59 | 0.62 | 62.3 |
| Group 2-H | 66 | 0.87 | 71 | 2.01 | 69 | 1.40 | 68.7 |
| Group 2-M | 62 | 1.66 | 69 | 2.51 | 73 | 2.47 | 68.0 |
| Group 2-L | 71.5 | 1.27 | 70 | 1.99 | 69 | 3.81 | 70.2 |
| Group 3-H | 70 | 0.97 | 63 | 1.32 | 74 | 3.54 | 69.0 |
| Group 3-M | 68 | 2.54 | 70 | 1.26 | 75 | 4.21 | 71.0 |
| Group 3-L | 58 | 0.84 | 66 | 3.21 | 65 | 4.03 | 63.0 |

Note: The full score in each of the three tests is 100 marks.

S.D. = standard deviation

From the table we can see that of the average marks, the highest is 72.7, which would not generally be regarded as particularly good. This indicates that when literary language appeared in the reading materials, the subjects' performance declined compared with their understanding of everyday language. It may be noted that some standard deviation values are quite high (Test 1: Group 1-H, Group 3-M; Test 2: Group 1-L, Group 1-H, Group 3-L; Test 3: Group 1-H, Group 2-L, Group 3-H, Group 3-M, Group 3-L). These standard deviations are indicative of the wide dispersal of the subjects' marks, which is further suggestive of the fact that only a few subjects achieved higher marks while others stood at the low end of the marks range. From this it can be inferred that the performance in dealing with literary language was not balanced across the subjects. Group 1-H turned out to be a typical case of such imbalanced performance. In all three tests, the dispersal of this group's average marks was so wide and variable that it appears to indicate that some subjects, even though their entrance English proficiency level was high, encountered difficulties when they were dealing with literary language. In other words, literary language made them unable to perform as well as they did in other proficiency tests that were largely composed of non-literary language.

In contrast, it can be seen that some subjects with low or medium entrance proficiency performed fairly well in the tests, for example, Group 2-L in Test 1, Group 1-M in Tests 2 and 3, Group 2-M in Test 3, Group 3-M in Tests 2 and 3. The tests brought them closer to students with high proficiency. It would be unreasonable to assume that they made sudden rapid progress during the experiment. In general, it would be realistic to say that

the subjects with high, medium or low proficiency all had trouble understanding and using literary language. In other words, they all found it difficult to deal with literary language. In the use of non-literary language, their differences in proficiency could be seen, but such differences became blurry in respect of literary language.

## 3. Discussion

Table 1 reveals that the nine teams of subjects achieved more or less similar results in the three tests. The slight differences between themselves are not highly significant, which means that the three strong H-teams did not perform substantially better than the others (M-teams and L-teams). Viewed from a different perspective, the data show that the nine subject teams stood very close in the three tests. If we examine the average test marks by assuming that the three tests were taken for the purpose of placement so that we can re-define the subjects' proficiency levels, then a rather different ranking appears, as in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: New Ranking of the Teams**

| Team | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|------|---------|---------|---------|
| Group 1-H | 72.7 | | |
| Group 1-M | 72.0 | | |
| Group 3-M | 71.0 | | |
| Group 2-L | 70.2 | | |
| Group 3-H | | 69.0 | |
| Group 2-H | | 68.7 | |
| Group 2-M | | 68.0 | |
| Group 3-L | | | 63.0 |
| Group 1-L | | | 62.3 |

In this hypothetical re-classification, 70 and 65 marks were respectively used as the cut-off points to position the nine teams of subjects into three levels. Although drawing a line of demarcation like this is somewhat arbitrary, it seems clear that the subjects of the three groups were brought much closer by the three tests that are full of literary language. In essence, this result of re-classification is thought-provoking, because across the three groups, some teams which were originally set at the Medium level (Group 1-M and Group 3-M) and the Low level (Group 2-L) entered the new High level. The new ranking is noteworthy in that the subjects of the H-teams did not outperform their counterparts in the tests as might have been expected. Moreover, it is interesting to note that two out of the three H-teams were even downgraded (Group 3-H and Group 2-H) from the H level to the M level whilst the only one that retained its original ranking stood very close to the other two teams in the same category.

Such an analysis result raises a question: what is the factor that affected the 'strong' subjects, who would otherwise have recorded a better performance? To re-phrase the question, what enabled the 'strong' subjects to outperform their peers and what made that advantage disappear?

To get an answer, we must make mention of the materials that were used by these subjects for learning English. Since all these subjects completed their primary and secondary school education in Hong Kong, it can be said that they learned English under the guidance of the same curriculum formulated for public education by the Hong Kong Government. In Hong Kong, although school authorities are free to select textbooks for classroom instruction and to use supplementary materials to enrich teaching, the official curriculum must nonetheless be implemented as a guideline for language education. The rationale for using the same curriculum is that all students will take the same language tests prior to secondary school graduation. Because of this cross-school control, the general orientation of classroom teaching and practice is more or less identical across all schools. Since all the textbooks are compiled in accordance with the curriculum, they are alike in general except for some insignificant differences. In classroom teaching, teachers are expected to follow the textbooks, though individual teachers may have their own creative ideas or preferences. Some teachers might decide to integrate selected literature works in order to enhance students' linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness. But for the majority of teachers, the teaching focus is curriculum-orientated and is directed towards basic communicative competence.

In other words, the 'strong' students could not have more contact with literary works through their school textbooks. For this reason, their higher performance in the university entrance language tests reflects their better command of the target language at the level required by the curriculum.

From the theoretical perspective, we can say that the 'strong' subjects gained an advantage over their peers only in what Cummins (1984) termed BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills). That is, they perform better in general use of English. Such competence may be based on relatively simple, short and basic structures of language, which do not require a higher level of cognitive capability. In other words, acquisition of BICS may be a matter of constant practice rather than using cognitive ability to have in-depth understanding. It may "hide the learners' relative inadequacy in the language proficiency necessary to meet the cognitive and academic demands of the classroom" (Baker, 2001, p. 169). Literary language is not within the scope of BICS but belongs, rather, to what Cummins (1984) called CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). Understanding literary language requires higher-order thinking skills (such as analysis, synthesis, judgment and evaluation) and the ability to manipulate language using abstraction in a sophisticated manner. Compared with BICS, comprehension of literary language is cognitively more demanding and less context-based. In face-to-face context-embedded communication learners can get non-verbal support to secure understanding. Eye contact, gestures and body movement, instant feedback and clarification, cues and clues all support verbal language. On the other hand, CALP is said to occur in context-reduced academic situations, and L2 learners are required to use higher-order thinking skills to achieve understanding. The present study suggest that the 'strong' subjects were stronger in BICS only, but not so in CALP. That can explain why their performance declined significantly when they had to deal with literary language. To perceive the authors' real meanings and references in literary works, readers often need to closely examine the language and use some knowledge of literary genres and social-cultural norms. It is common that L2 learners fail to understand figurative meaning in literary works, which is not as obvious as the meaning of plain language used in everyday face-to-face communication.

A further point is that language in textbooks and classroom practice is comparatively plain and easy to understand, and little elaborate literary language is included. Lack of contact with literary language confines the students' knowledge to limited varieties and styles of the target language, thus making them less aware of literary styles, literary writing devices, and other features which are often found in literary works, particularly in those that give detailed accounts of events or meticulous descriptions of scenery, feelings and thoughts, etc. It was because of this lack that the subjects of this study did not feel confident in dealing with literary language. Since Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced and recommended as the main teaching approach in Hong Kong schools in the 1980s, the teaching of English has been communication-orientated. Classroom practice, text materials and extracurricular activities are intended to serve the purpose of communication, particularly oral communication, on the assumption that the recognized goal of learning a second language is first and foremost communicative competence. As Littlewood (1998) notes, "Developments in linguistics have led to the formulation of the notion of 'communicative competence,' which includes linguistic competence but goes beyond it" (p. 2032). More specifically, communicative competence includes "knowledge of rules of speaking, e.g. knowing how to begin and end conversations, knowing what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations" (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1998, p. 82). From this standpoint, oral communication is of paramount importance in communication-oriented L2 education; in the classroom, speaking and listening remain the priority of practice. For this reason, school textbooks by and large focus on verbal communication with commonly-used ordinary language, whereas literature is, more often than not, ignored because it rarely occurs in routine daily communication.

Under this circumstance, literary language is hardly incorporated in text materials as authentic language, and is excluded from classroom instruction and practice. Unsurprisingly, it is not part of university entrance English tests. What is taught and learned is "the use of language materials authentic to native speakers of the target language" (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p. 132). Most of the textbook materials are natural language in a variety of situations such as maps, advertisements, pictures, symbols, signs, graphs, and charts. In consideration of the nature of the language from these sources, it is not surprising that the subjects of this study were not familiar with literary language. However, it must be pointed out and stressed that an emphasis on *authentic language* need not exclude literary language, for "the language of a literary text, like that of newspaper or magazine articles, is authentic in that it is produced by a native writer for native readers of the target language. Moreover, a single literary work may make use of various test types (narrative, dialogue, etc.), encompass a range of registers (formal, slang, etc.) and move between different styles (ironic, impressionistic, etc.)" (Pachler & Allford 2000, p.

240).

The exclusion of literary texts from ESL teaching is not limited to Hong Kong. This same even holds true for native-speaking English learners (Cook, 1996). As long ago as 1982, Widdowson noted a similar situation, "In a way literature has suffered as a result of hasty decisions about language teaching methodology. Literature was dismissed as irrelevant because it seemed not to be practical, because it seemed not to offer good models for language learners, because it seemed not to be down-to-earth and to relate to the everyday world which language teaching is supposed to prepare people for" (Widdowson, 1982, p. 81). This suggests that limited or no use of literary texts is widespread in language education, which is heavily influenced by CLT. Therefore, it can be surmised that ESL learners generally have limited exposure to literary language.

Then, why should literature be considered as a kind of linguistic input to ESL learners? The answer is precisely because "literary texts embody the target language in authentic use and can provide insights into social and cultural dimensions of the country where it is spoken" (Pachler & Allford, 2000, p. 238). When learners read a passage constructed in plain everyday language, they can anticipate the contexts and take short cuts to comprehension. Very often they have some notions about the topics and they can use their prior knowledge to find out what is going on in the passage without difficulty. In such cases, learners may obtain a minimal amount of information through such a procedure, and the information they get is usually what can fit the frame of reference they have already established. With a suitable framework, they can follow the line of thought in the process, even though they may encounter some difficulties, like unknown words. In addition, most sentences in everyday language are limited in length and simple in structure. All these facilitate the learners' comprehension but may create a misleading impression of their competence.

However, as authentic linguistic input, literary language can feature richer social and cultural information as well as the authors' artistic use of language structures and writing techniques for the purpose of creating some desired effects. This requires more in-depth awareness of culture, social customs, language structures and vocabulary. The learners have to resort to some demanding interpretative procedures that are usually not required in general communication. Literary language may have the potential to improve language proficiency, written and possibly oral, and to enrich one's language and cultural knowledge (Carter, 2007; Gerber, 1990; Ghosn, 2002; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988; Rifkin, 2006).

To some extent, this study confirms Paran's view (2008). After surveying the existing research and evidence on incorporating literature in language lessons, he concluded, "It is clear that literature does have something very special to offer to language learning" (Paran, 2008, p. 490). Although literary language is not as easy to understand and use as other types of language, as Hirvela (2001) reported, it has a potential to enhance learners' competence.

## 4. Conclusion

Despite infrequent appearance in conversational communication, literary language has its place in L2 education. This study provides data on the discriminative power of literary language in measuring English learners' proficiency. It reveals that if teachers want to develop L2 learners' abilities to understand complex discourses, then literature has a role to play. But if the focus is placed on basic interpersonal communication skills, then a capacity to speak and write general English may be presumed to be equated with proficiency; thus other important factors of proficiency are likely to be ignored. With CLT being prevalent, literary language should be introduced in conjunction with it, particularly after the initial "survival" level has been passed, to help L2 learners obtain more linguistic, cultural and social knowledge and experience, and enhance, at least, their reading comprehension ability.

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