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Teaching Language through Literature: George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant' in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This article intends to show how an English language teaching material can be developed using a literary text. It is a qualitative study, and I have used the content analysis method. Here the first and the second paragraphs of the essay, "Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell, are explored for bringing out potential linguistic features to be taught to undergraduate level students who learn English as a foreign language (hereafter, EFL). All the four basic skills of English language are emphasized in this teaching material. Different items like comprehension questions, guessing the meaning from the context, identification of phrases and identification of ironic expressions are set to develop and test students' comprehension level. Items, like breaking up long sentences into smaller ones, changing sentences, rewriting sentences and writing paragraphs, are designed to develop the writing skill of the students. Similarly, items for developing listening and speaking skills of the learners are also retained in this material. It is shown that an essay can also be a potential source for developing language teaching material only if the selection is properly made. Further studies may test the effectiveness of the material for teaching both basic language skills and language areas.

Keywords: Literature and language teaching, EFL, essay, basic language skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

There is a close relationship between language and literature. This “relationship between literature and language is symbiotic” (Ihejirika, 2014, p. 85). In other words, literature and language are complementary to each other (Farida, 2000). Literature can be considered as an ally of language. If EFL learners are exposed to language that literature represents, they will be benefitted. It is literature that contributes to transforming a dialect into a language and gives *aesthetic* value to it because language is the medium of literature.

Yet, there is debate regarding the superiority of one over the other. Teaching language through literature is, I think, the best way to resolve this debate. (Ihejirika, 2014, p. 85) points out that a “classroom factor threatening effective acquisition of English language is the method of teaching literature which separates it from the English language”. This is evident as Ray (2004, p. iii) says that a “student of literature must also know how to apply the insights of linguistics to the appreciation of literature”. So, teaching language through literature can be the middle way to address the problem of superiority-inferiority debate. That is why a new trend of using authentic literary texts in the language classroom has emerged. Newer and newer literary texts are exploited in the language classroom as teaching-learning materials. Roy and Mahmud (2014) observe that there is a scarcity of materials, and teachers and students face immense difficulties because of the unavailability of study materials. This paper proposes a material which can be used for language teaching/learning activities in the EFL classroom.

1.2 Selection

While thinking about the use of literary text in the EFL classroom, many researchers (such as Finch, 2003; Hadaway et al., 2002; Kırkgöz, 2008; Panavelil, 2011; Rahman & Sharif, 2018) have selected poetry. Some researchers (such as Erkaya, 2005; Ompusunggu, 2018; Pardede, 2011; Pourkalhor & Kohan, 2013) have selected short stories as teaching materials. But an essay can also be a fruitful source for the teachers to teach language to the learners, especially if the selection is properly made. An attempt is made here to exploit a part of an essay to be used in a language classroom. I have selected two extracts from the essay because extracts, instead of whole texts, should be given because “long texts might have the risk of demotivating the learners’ interest with too much of the same topic” (Farida, 2000, p. 56).

The opening paragraph and the second paragraph of “Shooting an Elephant” (1936) by George Orwell (1903-1950), the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair, is selected for this purpose. The selection is made for various reasons. Firstly, these two paragraphs of the essay do not seem to be those of an essay. Rather they resemble those of a short story or novel, especially because of their ability to create suspense. Suspense is something that pursues readers to read forward. The use of the word ‘hated’ in the very first sentence of the opening paragraph creates a sort of suspense among the readers regarding the reason(s) of the hatred. Secondly, the paragraphs are full of ironic expressions which are necessary for introducing learners with the dynamic use of language. Thirdly, there are explicit humorous expressions in the passages, capable of causing laughter among the learners and relieving their monotony. Fourthly, there

is a cultural similarity between the people of Myanmar (Burma) and those of Bangladesh. This cultural similarity is helpful for the learners in that they may not face any culture shock while going through the text. Culture shock refers to “anxiety relating to disorientation from exposure to a new culture (Gass, 2013, p. 459). Finally, the selection is exploitable in a class, at a stretch or in segments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature has been used for teaching EFL for the past two decades or so (Pourkalhor & Kohan, 2013). Hişmanoğlu (2005) gives a detailed description not only of literature and the teaching of language skills but also of the benefits of different genres of literature to language teaching. But he does not include essays in his study. An essay can also be used as material if properly selected and utilized in the EFL classroom.

In teaching language through literature, George Orwell’s essays in general, and “Shooting an Elephant” in particular, have most often been studied in terms of developing the writing skill, and hence of style. But there are contrary views as well. For example, Clausson (2011) thinks that “the misguided use of Orwell’s essays as models...suitable for students to imitate in their own essays is founded on a demonstrably erroneous understanding of the real role that style plays in Orwell’s essays” (p. 304). However, my focus is not only on developing the writing skill of the EFL learners but also on developing their listening, speaking and reading skills.

Meyers (2005) compares George Orwell with William Somerset Maugham for his use of direct language and unambiguous expression in writing and his distrust in dressing up facts and ideas to make them more palatable. He considers the opening of the essay "Shooting an Elephant" to be striking and effective enough to hook the reader immediately. He does not, however, focus on how the striking opening of the essay can be a tool for developing the language skills of the learners.

Most studies focus on the suitability of "Shooting an Elephant" for writing skill development. As far as I know, “Shooting an Elephant” has never been used as a resource for teaching/developing four basic skills of English like listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3. METHOD

This is a qualitative study, and I have used the content analysis method. Both primary and secondary sources are used for collecting data. I have used the essay “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell as the primary source. Relevant research works, especially scholarly articles and books, are used as secondary sources for the study.

In the content analysis method, three phases of studying the data were conducted: preparation, organizing and reporting (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). In the first phase, the essay chosen was carefully read to understand the text in detail. Next, the second phase of organization involved establishing the resource for teaching and developing the four basic skills of English, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing, based on the selected essay. Finally, in the last phase, is reporting on what has been assembled for the teaching materials based on the selected essay.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Reading Skill

An EFL learner must develop his/her reading skill for decoding the meaning of the text he/she reads. Reading is often regarded as the recognition and comprehension of words (Ur, 2012). A good reader can get the meaning of a text by identifying keywords and guessing the meaning of new words.

4.1.1 Comprehension questions

The learners may be asked to answer some questions set from the selection. This activity can assess learners' comprehension of the passages. For example, they may be provided with the following questions:

- a. Where is Moulmein situated?
- b. Why did the writer feel important?
- c. What was the profession of the writer?
- d. What do you think is the reason for spitting betel juice over the dress of any European woman?
- e. Why did the referee look the other way in the football field?
- f. What got badly on the nerves of the writer?
- g. Who was the worst of all?
- h. What was the usual activity of the young Buddhist priests?
- i. What is the keyword in the first sentence of the passage?
- j. What is the tone of the author?
- k. Why did the essayist want to leave the job?
- l. Why did the essayist support the Burmese secretly?
- m. What oppressed the essayist?
- n. What was imposed on every Englishman in the East?
- o. Who are referred to as 'little beasts'?
- p. What are the normal by-products of imperialism?

4.1.2 Guessing meaning from context

Understanding the context becomes vital for decoding the meaning of some words. According to Crystal (2003), "words, it is suggested, have meaning only when seen in context" (p. 103). The teacher can ask the students to guess the meaning of a word with the help of the context. The students can be instructed to put a tick mark (✓) on the correct answer. Examples of such items are given below:

- a. petty
 - i. small or trivial; unimportant
 - ii. attractive in a delicate way without being truly beautiful or handsome
 - iii. to a moderately high degree; fairly
- b. riot
 - i. a wild or violent protest by a crowd of people
 - ii. a large or splendid display of something
 - iii. a very amusing thing or person
- c. obvious
 - i. easily perceived or understood; clear, self-evident, or apparent

- ii. predictable and lacking in subtlety
- iii. obsolete being or standing in the way
- d. sneering
 - i. to smile, laugh, or contort the face in a manner that shows scorn or contempt
 - ii. to speak or write in a manner expressive of derision or scorn
 - iii. to utter or say in a sneering manner
- e. jeer
 - i. to speak or shout derisively; scoff or gibe rudely
 - ii. to shout derisively at; taunt
 - iii. to treat with scoffs or derision; mock
- f. guts
 - i. the stomach or belly
 - ii. personal courage and determination; toughness of character
 - iii. cause (someone) to feel extremely upset or disappointed
- g. bait
 - i. food used to entice fish or other animals as prey
 - ii. deliberately annoy or taunt (someone)
 - iii. a male or female who is appealing to the opposite sex
- h. nimble
 - i. quick to comprehend
 - ii. quick and light in movement or action; agile
 - iii. clumsy
- i. yell
 - i. to utter or declare with or as if with a yell
 - ii. to give a cheer usually in unison
 - iii. to utter or declare with or as if with a yell
- j. hoot
 - i. a deep or medium-pitched musical sound, often wavering or interrupted
 - ii. to shout or laugh usually mockingly
 - iii. somebody who is funny, a barrel of laughs, got a great sense of humor

4.1.3 Identification of ironic expressions

Irony is a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used. There are some ironic expressions in the selection. In reading literary texts, [Collie and Slater \(1987\)](#) observe, “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...” (p. 4). The learners may be asked to identify the ironic expression(s) from the expressions given below:

- i. In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me.
- ii. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress.
- iii. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so.
- iv. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter.

- v. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.
- vi. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

This activity can be fruitful as the learners have to use different reading strategies. The teacher may familiarize the learners with contextual understanding and understanding the whole text.

4.1.4 Identification of phrases

The learners may be asked to identify different phrases used in the selection. For example, they may be provided with the following phrases and asked to identify them as Noun Phrase, Adjective Phrase, and Prepositional Phrase, etc.

- a. In Moulmein
- b. in Lower Burma
- c. large numbers of people
- d. the only time
- e. in my life
- f. important enough
- g. was hated
- h. to happen
- i. sub-divisional police officer
- j. an aimless, petty kind of way
- k. anti-European feeling
- l. of the town
- m. make up one's mind
- n. the grey, cowed faces
- o. an unbreakable tyranny
- p. the will of prostrate peoples
- q. Feelings like these

Such identification of phrases can be done as pair work or group work. Group work may help the learners share their knowledge with each other (Sevy, 2016). This interaction among students is very effective in the learning process.

4.2 Writing Skill

Developing the writing skill is crucial to the success of an EFL learner. A good mastery of English writing skills plays an important role in effective communication. Such mastery cannot be achieved easily because writing is the hardest of the integral skills for the teaching of English in an EFL context (Ananda et al., 2014).

4.2.1 Breaking up long sentences

Breaking up long sentences into short ones is a good way to make the readers understand the expressions because long sentences become a problem when they contain difficult concepts, and when there are several of them in sequence. "The average length of a sentence in English", Wallwork (2016) says, "has become shorter and shorter over the centuries. In Shakespeare's time it was about 45 words, 150 years ago it was about 29 words, and today's experts recommended between 15 and 18

words” (p. 57). There are some long sentences in the selected paragraphs. The students may be asked to break the sentences up and make short, simple sentences maintaining cohesion and coherence because the longer the sentence, the greater the chance it will be misunderstood (Wallwork, 2016). These sentences may be selected for this purpose:

- i. In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me.
- ii. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress.
- iii. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter.
- iv. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves.
- v. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.
- vi. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better.
- vii. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt.
- viii. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East.
- ix. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it.
- x. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible.
- xi. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts.
- xii. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

4.2.2 *Changing sentences*

The learners may be asked to change the following sentences as directed in parentheses:

- a. I was hated by large numbers of people. (Negative)
- b. No one had the guts to raise a riot. (Interrogative)
- c. As a police officer I was an obvious target. (Compound)
- d. This happened more than once. (Negative)
- e. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. (Positive)
- f. The crowd yelled with hideous laughter. (Complex)
- g. But I could get nothing into perspective. (Interrogative)

4.2.3 *Writing sentences*

There are simple, complex and compound sentences in the selection. The learners may be instructed to identify the structure of a particular sentence that is present in the

selection and then may be asked to write a number of sentences having a similar structure. This activity can be given as homework if the class duration does not permit.

4.2.4 Writing paragraph

The selected paragraphs can be used as a model for the learners for developing writing skill. [Shahidullah \(2008, p. 3\)](#) says that a “paragraph is a unit of discourse that usually refers to writing and occurs as part of a longer discourse like essays, assignments, etc.” Each learner may be asked to write a narrative paragraph following the model. The paragraph may be written on the bitterest experience, preferably in the playground, of a learner’s life. The learner may be asked to use humorous expressions in the paragraph. Humor is almost absent in academic writing. Use of humorous expressions in the paragraph will certainly increase his/her interest in writing and motivate him/her to write freely.

4.3 Listening and Speaking Skills

For successful oral communication, an EFL learner must develop his/her listening and speaking skills. [Hanifa \(2018\)](#) contends that "mastery of speaking becomes the most important aspect of learning a foreign language compared with the other language skills" (p. 230). An EFL learner must be familiar with the varieties of English and variations in English pronunciations. Some activities can help the learner improve his/her listening and speaking skills.

4.3.1 Sharing personal experience

A listening and speaking practice session may be conducted by the teacher after the reading and writing activities are done. The teacher may start this segment by narrating a couple of personal experiences to the learners. Then each learner may be asked to tell a similar incident that happened in his/her life like that of the Burmese player and the referee in the football match, or that of spitting betel juice on the dress of the European woman, or that of being yelled at by others. When a learner is allowed to tell such a story, other learners will be asked to listen to him/her carefully and then reproduce the incident heard. [Lazar \(1993, p. 17\)](#) says, “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”.

4.3.2 Pronunciation practice

My own experience in teaching communicative English to undergraduate students confirms that many EFL students have the problem of pronouncing English words correctly. First language interference is one of the main reasons. So, the students should have a balanced idea about the sound systems of both the first language and the foreign language. In fact, knowledge of the sound systems of the mother tongue or the first language is a crucial factor that determines one’s ability to pronounce foreign language words correctly. Students may be asked to practice both the British and the American pronunciations of a list of words that are frequently mispronounced. British English differs from American English “not only in pronunciation but also in

vocabulary, spelling and grammar” (Hornby, 2015, p. R27). The list (I have mentioned some changed forms in parentheses) may include the words shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Words and their IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) transcriptions¹.

<i>Word</i>	<i>British pronunciation (in IPA)</i>	<i>American pronunciation (in IPA)</i>
against	/ə'genst/ /ə'geɪnst/	/ə'genst/ /ə'geɪnst/
bamboos	/ˌbæm'buːz/	/ˌbæm'buːz/
(bamboo)	/ˌbæm'buː/	/ˌbæm'buː/
cages	/'keɪdʒɪz/	/'keɪdʒəz/
(cage)	/keɪdʒ/	/keɪdʒ/
close	/kləʊz/	/kloʊz/
corners	/'kɔːnəz/	/'kɔːrnəz/
(corner)	/'kɔːnə(r)/	/'kɔːrnər/
enough	/ɪ'nʌf/	/ɪ'nʌf/
everywhere	/'evriweə(r)/	/'evriwer/
evil	/'iːvl/ /'iːvɪl/	/'iːvl/ /'iːvɪl/
face	/feɪs/	/feɪs/
hated	/'heɪtɪd/	/'heɪtəd/
(hate)	/heɪt/	/heɪt/
(hatred)	/'heɪtrɪd/	/'heɪtrɪd/
ill-educated	/ɪl-/ 'edʒə, keɪtəd/	/ɪl-/ 'edʒə, keɪtəd/
jeer	/dʒɪə(r)/	/dʒɪr/
obvious	/'ɒbvɪəs/	/'ɑːbvɪəs/
officer	/'ɒfɪsə(r)/	/'ɔːfɪsər/ /'ɑːfɪsər/
police	/pə'liːs/	/pə'liːs/
raise	/reɪz/	/reɪz/
referee	/'refə'riː/	/'refə'riː/
safe	/seɪf/	/seɪf/
several	/'sevrəl/	/'sevrəl/
somebody	/'sʌmbədi/	/'sʌmbədi/
when	/wen/	/wen/
whenever	/wen'evə(r)/	/wen'evər/
woman	/'wʊmən/	/'wʊmən/
(women)	/'wɪmɪn/	/'wɪmɪn/
worst	/wɜːst/	/wɜːrst/
wretched	/'retʃɪd/	/'retʃɪd/
yellow	/'jeləʊ/	/'jeləʊ/
young	/'jʌŋ/	/'jʌŋ/

In this regard, Hoque (2010, p. 215) reveals that “the sound of consonant clusters is also problematic for Bengali speakers. They put a short vowel within or before the consonant cluster”. The teacher may instruct the students to pay special attention to the pronunciation of the consonant sound /r/.

4.3.3 Vocabulary development

A good stock of vocabulary is vital because many EFL students fail in university reading and writing tasks because of having an inadequate or underdeveloped vocabulary. The selected paragraphs can be a source for the learners to develop their vocabulary. There are some interesting words in these paragraphs. Learners of undergraduate level may get pleasure in learning the words shown in Table 2.

¹ For the IPA transcriptions of the words, I have mainly consulted the online edition of Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (2017).

Table 2. A list of alphabetically arranged words.

<i>Anglo-Indian</i>	<i>Evil-spirited</i>	<i>Jeer</i>	<i>Sneering</i>
baited	flogged with	make up one's mind	spit
bayonet	guts	nimble	stinking
betel juice	hideous	oppressor	supplant
bitter	hoot	petty	trip somebody up
by-product	huddling	perplexing	tyranny
chuck up	imperialism	prostrate	yell
cowed	imposed	rage	-

The teacher may ask the learners to change the word class. The learners may make sentences of their own with the changed part of speech. This activity will enrich their capability to effectively and appropriately using words in various sentences. The learners may look up the words in a dictionary of synonyms and antonyms. Learning synonyms and antonyms is a good way of enriching vocabulary.

4.3.4 Role-play session

Role-play is “pretending to be someone else, especially as part of learning a new skill” (McIntosh, 2015, p. 1336). The students may be asked to play the role of the referee in the football match or that of the spitter of betel juice. This role-play session can be effective for developing listening and speaking skills. The teacher can instruct learners to pay special attention to accent, pronunciation, intonation, stress and speaker-listener rapport. Intonation plays a significant role as it “affects the meaning of what is being said” (Hornby, 2015, p. 826) of the utterances.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how the selected extracts of the essay can be exploited in an EFL classroom for teaching the four basic skills of English language. The reading skill of the learners may be developed and tested through comprehension questions, guessing word meaning from the context, identification of ironic expressions and identification of phrases. Their writing skill can be developed through breaking up long sentences, writing paragraphs, writing sentences and changing sentences as directed. Their listening and speaking skills can be developed by asking them to tell similar incidents from practical experiences, through pronunciation practice and by asking them to participate in the role-play session. In this way, the selection, though from an essay, can be successfully used as an effective material in EFL classrooms. Hence, for further studies, it is recommended that these materials be tested for its effectiveness for teaching the language skills.

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APPENDIX

Shooting an Elephant (The Opening Two Paragraphs)

In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

(George Orwell, 2009, pp. 28-29)