

AWEJ Volume.4 Number.2, 2013

Pp.122-136

Teaching the Regular and the Irregular Verbs through a Cultural-based Literary Discourse in an ESL Grammar Classroom

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Abstract

This paper provides examples of learning the two forms of the past simple tense through literature that expose pragmatic learning outcomes without the need of grammatical rules during the early to mid-learning stages. Simultaneously, the learners get to learn the English culture, which broadens their perceptions of the language since culture and language are intertwined with one another. Taken as an account, the popular English story, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, provides useful examples of exercises on the regular and irregular verbs, bringing language to the level of enjoyment to the learning experience. In addition, the learners would have the opportunity to appreciate the culture and civilization of the target language. To determine how these outcomes can be implemented in ESL classrooms, this paper manifests a new emergence of understanding literature by emphasizing on innovating challenging and enthusiastic teaching methodologies to extrinsically motivate today's learners. Examples of the use of literature for teaching grammar in an ESL class are provided throughout the research.

Keywords: past simple tense, regular and irregular verbs, ESL learners, target language, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

Introduction

This paper examines the role of literature in teaching practical grammar to ESL learners by using various literary texts for language practices. It will also cover how literature can be an asset in learning the culture of the target language for the means of communication, as Alptekin (2002) states that bilinguals require a profound perception of the language's culture for professional communication. It may be durable to acquire the target language without the full understanding of the target's culture because according to Hymes (1972), Kitao (1991) and Alpetkin (2002), culture and language must be equal with one another for a full language competence and communication. In this case, a literary material is selected, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which has a 'set to the message' Selden, Widdowson, Brooker (2005) in its literary meanings that will help the learners to grasp an idea of the story in its form and culture as they practice on the two forms of the past simple tense in context.

The importance and the quick spread of the English Language have prompted the Emirati Higher Ministry of Education force university learners to pass an official language proficiency exam such as the Academic IELTS or TOEFL. Nevertheless, many university learners encounter difficulties in understanding the language and its culture due to the lack of the vocabulary of the target language and language practice during their growing years that have led to their vulnerable knowledge of any foreign culture, whether the British or the American culture. These obstacles have not only troubled the university learners, but also the language instructors who, occasionally, have to expose them to the cultures of the language in use in prior to language instruction.

For many learners enrolled in English courses in the universities, the suggestion that they can achieve better grades when understanding the culture may seem at best unusual. Most of them view the courses as means of assisting them in completing the university mandatory courses instructed in English, to pass a language proficiency exam and to correspond suavely. They may find it difficult to see that culture has a great impact upon grammar because, when younger, they have studied grammar as a set of rules detached from the origins of these rules and their cultural meanings. In other words, they have not learnt how to mingle with the target language through the socialization process - "the process in which children are socialized both through language and to use language within a community has been largely examined without regard to the dynamics of grammatical development, focusing, rather, on culturally relevant communicative practices and activities" (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2009, p.303 - 304).

Consequently, it is crucial for the learners to acquire the language and its culture at earlier stages to have them as a habitual practice during their growing years as based in the Behaviorist Theory of Skinner (1957) and Chastain (1976) where language learning is perceived as a matter of habit formation through strengthening the associations between stimulus and response through reinforcement because human language is considered as a sophisticated response system that can be acquired through drilling and repetition. For instance, in the case of the story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it will be to no avail to teach its lingual contents without conceiving the literary meanings and the cultural background of the story. The integrated lingual and cultural factors of the era would be enhanced through various drilling and repetition techniques by exploiting a number of grammar exercises. Moreover, these techniques could be applied to other stories, and with time, the learners, would be more or less, in their first-rank mastering the language as they learn to socialize with the language.

Learning culture through grammar

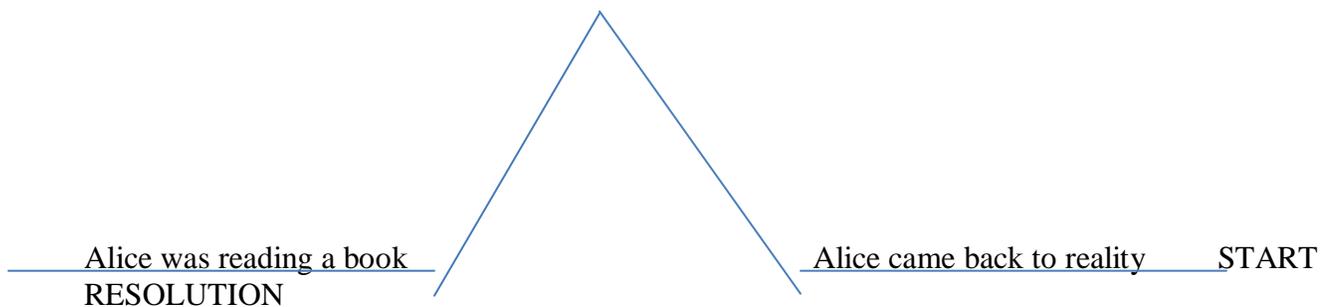
The concept of using literature in a modern language classroom is to arise the learners' cultural awareness from stories that have been long forgotten or not known to them, like (Long, 1987, p. 280) who suggests that literature should be involved in classes of English for non-native learners but in another pedagogical approach... "the teaching of literature is an arid business unless there is a response, and even negative responses can create an interesting classroom situation." Nevertheless, it is a barrier for any ESL primary teacher who decides to use literature in a language classroom by galling to find a suitable text relevant to the grammar exercise, which means that the exercise and the selected text must be connected to the objectives of the lesson. For instance, the past simple tense must be "related to content" (Johns & Price-Machado, 2001, p. 44) that provides sufficient practical exercises of the tense to use in the classroom.

Before commencing a grammar exercise, it is crucial to introduce the learners to the story's protagonists, antagonists, settings and some major literary traits. The benefits of this introduction are; firstly, when exercising on texts from the story, they would have some ideas of what they are reading about, and secondly, the literary traits already discussed by the teacher will be analyzed and criticized for a better understanding of the English culture. In this case, it will be easier for the learners to perceive the vocabulary as they predict the story's happenings. Exemplified is a brief illustration of the story that could be presented during a warm-up session:

Figure 1. *The Start, Climax and the Resolution of the story, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*

Alice was rebuffed and threatened by many strange creatures

CLIMAX



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is loaded with an ocean of grammar lessons from passages that can quite easily attract the attention of young learners that are, in their natural stages, eager to understand what is happening to 'Alice'. The three main aims when a teacher chooses a literary text are: firstly, teaching the learners the language of the text (the most common lexical items); secondly, relating the text to the target grammar lesson and thirdly, introducing to them, indirectly, the culture of the language in use such as the concept of *loneliness* felt by 'Alice' in Chapter One. In this case, the teacher explains *where have her feelings of loneliness led her and why has she felt lonely*. An answer to this will open up a class discussion about the risks of being adventurous, and that, it is more acceptable to appreciate a normal life with friends and families. Successively, comparisons and contrasts of the story's and the learners' cultures emerge as the teacher triggers them with minor questions such as "How do you spend your free time?" The teacher will explain that 'Alice' was reading a book without pictures and will compare her reading activity to other actual activities performed by the learners during their free times. Such a

comparison may lead to a suggestion of reading an English story for the purpose of motivating them to learn about the other culture in an entertaining manner.

With regards to these aims, pictures accompanied with the texts are more convivial by the learners since they assist them in better understanding the text(s) they will be working on. Furthermore, pictures reinforce the young learners' imaginations which will help get the staple of the story as they try to tie certain events discussed through grammar exercises. In this case, some pictures unrelated to the current reading text may imply or foreshadow what the learners are about to read for the purposes of analyses or critical thinking. However, the target here is to exercise on the two forms of the tense through an English story to bridge the gap between language and culture to the ESL learners.

Choosing a picture is not as simple as when choosing a text. The teacher does not only have to make sure that the picture and the text match, but also that there are sufficient exercises to work on to develop the learners' language skills. For example, the text following the picture of the 'Rabbit' on the next page can offer various grammar exercises. The first two exercises are simple grammar lessons, as for the last, it is .a cultural grammar exercise that introduces the synonyms of the words in context. It is like paraphrasing the actual text for the purposes of reinforcing the learners' grammatical skills and acquiring vocabulary. The target words from the original text are, respectively, i) took out; ii) occurred; iii) wondered and iv) rushed.

Furthermore, the picture presents exactly what the text talks about and this method helps the learners to perceive the story better in addition to reinforcing their grammatical skills in an entertaining manner.

Figure 2. *The 'Rabbit' holding a waistcoat pocket*



(p.1)

Exercise 1: Underline the past simple verbs in the following text.

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh, dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over

afterward, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit *actually took_a watch out of its waistcoat pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on.

Exercise 2: State how many regular and irregular verbs are there in the text.

- a. There are _____ regular verbs.
 - b. There are _____ irregular verbs.
-

Exercise 3: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb in the past simple tense.

The strange animal _____ (remove) its watch from his coat. The girl _____ (happen) to show that she _____ (question) what the Rabbit did as it _____ (hurry) down the rabbit-hole.

Choosing a text in practice that best describes a picture will ease the flow of the lesson by getting the most of the story and learning new words that are from the culture of the studied story such as *waistcoat pocket*. The chosen text does not satisfy the learners' eagerness because they would be wondering about the peculiar 'Rabbit's destination and why it was in a hurry. The teacher can supply them with some answers through assigning different class or home work on the past simple from subsequent texts.

Consequently, teaching language through literature is useful in many ways, as Collie and Slater (1987) state the reasons for a language teacher to use literary texts with ESL learners:

- Literature is a valuable authentic material because readers have to deal with language intended for native speakers (different linguistic uses, forms and conventions)
- *Cultural enrichment*. The imagined world of literature reveals thoughts, feelings, customs, and other features of life of the country where English is spoken.
- *Language enrichment*. Literary texts offer many features of written language that can broaden learners' skills.
- *Personal involvement*. Engaging imagination with literature helps learners to change their attention from language system to the story itself. Sometimes the readers are drawn into the development of the plot." The language becomes 'transparent' – the fiction summons the whole person into its own world. (p. 8)

Activities on the regular and the irregular verbs

Teachers always taught that regular verbs take *-ed* and *-ied*, and the irregular verbs change within their forms, and which they have to learn by heart. In this case, the learners are required to learn grammar and then develop their grammatical knowledge into practice, whereas, if they get

trained from their early years to be indirectly exposed to vocabulary and grammar exercises that are learned and developed by constructing a set of rules which will characterize the language that surrounds them, it will enable them to use it for both speaking and understanding Chomsky (1969).

Grammar is “the way words are put together to make correct sentences” (Ur, 1996, p.75) to make speaking and understanding possible. So, teaching grammar in contexts is important since it promotes the learners' English Language to advanced levels without the concerns of encountering challenging situations that require using the language such as taking official language proficiency exams, studying majors that are instructed in the target language or for their career promotions. Moreover, language develops within human individuals and within human culture to ensure maximally successful communication (Tomlin, 1994), so learning grammar the traditional way is a matter of who can learn it smoothly or not, and most of the ESL learners will not process it for a long time due to the nil or almost nil of language practice outside the classrooms and within their social contexts.

Therefore, analyzing the language itself seems to be a productive step during the early learning process if a teacher uses specific skills to familiarize the language to the learners. In other words, if the learners are introduced gradually to the culture of the story in study through discussion and class activities, the grammar lessons would start building up on its own without going through the heaps of the grammatical rules. (Rutherford, 1987). Many ESL teachers acknowledge that teaching and learning grammar are never easy. The teachers must be well-equipped to be able to teach a certain lesson to a multi-level class, and the learners must study these rules over and over again until they can confidently construct sentences smoothly. However, teaching grammar the literary way is like deconstructing the language into simpler terms, so that not only the learners with good command of the language can understand, but also the ones that lack confidence in speaking and writing the language will be encouraged to use it more often to improve their English.

In order to be able to use the language vividly and properly, it is better for learners to understand more about the usage of grammar rather than telling how it is used through a set of fun class activities. It is stated that "A study of grammar in texts is a study of grammar in use," (Carter, 1997, p. 34), and based on that some suggested activities have been designed on the regular and irregular verbs. Such activities would allow the learners to investigate the grammar rules without going through the big humps of a book of rules.

The focus of this paper is creating productive exercises on the regular and irregular verbs from the selected story without the need to state the title of the grammar lesson to young ESL learners. Hence, five pragmatic activities are suggested on the two types of the past simple verbs that a teacher may use in his or her lesson.

Activity 1 – Veiled wonder words

Aim: To look up the regular and the irregular verbs.

Description: The teacher explains the regular and irregular verbs on the board. Next, the learners look for the regular verbs and the irregular verbs from the text.

Ready or not! Find the regular and the irregular verbs.

Down the Rabbit-Hole**Chapter 1**

Suddenly she came upon a little three-legged table, all made of solid glass; there was nothing on it except a tiny golden key, and Alice's first thought was that it might belong to one of the doors of the hall; but, alas! Either the locks were too large, or the key was too small, but at any rate it would not open any of them. However, on the second time around, she came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door about fifteen inches high: she tried the little golden key in the lock, and to her great delight it fitted!

Figure 3. Alice holding the key



(p. 6)

- _____
- There are _____ regular verbs.
 - There are _____ irregular verbs.

Activity 2 – What verbs are the Gangnam Style and what are not!

Aim: i) To identify the action and the state verbs. ii) To use the verbs in sentences.

Description: The teacher plays the song and moves with the rhythm. She or he then pauses the song and stops moving. The learners must try to guess why the teacher is dancing. The teacher explains that any physical activity is expressed with an action verb like *dancing*.

Read the text below. Get into the groove as you underline the state verbs and circle the action verbs.

A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale

Chapter 3

Alice thought the whole thing was very absurd, but they all looked very grave that she did not dare to laugh; and, she could not think of anything to say, she simply bowed, and took the thimble, looking as solemn as she could.

The next thing was to eat the comfits: this caused some noise and confusion, as the large birds complained that they could not taste theirs, and the small ones choked and had to be patted on the back.

Figure 4. Alice being granted her own comfit by the chief bird



(p. 27)

Use a state verb and an action verb in sentences.

State verb:

Action verb:

Activity 3 – The Englishwood Stars

Aim: To act out the past simple verbs.

Description: The learners in teams look up the verbs and act them out. The most points go to the best performing team by acting out the meaning of the word.

You think you are a star! Look for the past simple verbs and get on stage!

Pig and Pepper

Chapter 6

"If you're going to turn into a pig, my dear, said Alice, seriously, "I'll have nothing more to do with you. Mind now!" The poor little thing sobbed again (or grunted, it was impossible to say which), and they went on for some while in silence.

Alice was just beginning to think to herself, "Now, what am I to do with this creature when I get it home?" when it grunted again, so violently, that she looked down into its face in some alarm.

Figure 5. Alice holding the nagging baby pig



(p. 69)

Activity 4 – Time up!

Aim: To match the rhyming past simple verbs from each passage.

Description: The learners are in teams. Each team will be assigned one to two minutes to look for a pair of rhyming words in each paragraph.

Look for a pair of past simple verbs that rhyme in each paragraph. What do the

rhyming verbs mean?

The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill

Chapter 4

(A) "That you won't!" thought Alice, and after waiting till she fancied she heard the Rabbit just under the window, she suddenly spread out her hand, and made a snatch in the air.

Figure 6. Gigantic Alice trying to grab the annoying Rabbit



(p. 38)

Pig and Pepper

Chapter 6

(B) The Fish-Footman began by producing from under his arm a great letter, nearly as large as himself, and this he handed over to the other saying, in a solemn tone, "For the Duchess. An invitation from the Queen to play croquet." The Frog-Footman repeated, in the same solemn tone, only changing the order of the words a little, "From the Queen. An invitation for the Duchess to play

croquet."

They both bowed low, and their curls got entangled together.

Figure 7. The funny royal messengers exchanging salutations



(p. 60 – p. 61)

Activity 5 – Use me right!

Aims: i) To work together to create a text. ii) To practice or revise the past simple verbs.

Description: A text with blanks is written on the board. A picture about the text is hung next to the board. The learners in teams guess the missing words.

The teacher informs the learners in brief about the chapter of the text, '**The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill.**' Then, she or he explains to the learners that they should fill in the blanks with past simple verbs (written on the board) that best complete the sentences.

Hardly knowing what she _____, she _____ up a little bit of stick, and _____ it out to the puppy; whereupon the puppy _____ into the air of all its feet at once, with a yelp of delight, and _____ at the stick.'

Figure 8. The puppy who is longing to play with someone



(p. 44)

Why is a lesson plan important?

The learners can feel displaced when starting the story in grammar by missing the target of the lesson. So, the teacher must give them the confidence they need by preparing before class to state the lesson's objective(s) and to be able to assess what have the learners learnt or missed, and the reasons behind them. The suggested lesson plan should include five main steps. The first four are to be implemented during the lesson, within forty-five minutes (a standard school lesson), whereas, step five is a feedback that a teacher recommends after giving a particular class:

Step 1 – Warm-up

Before exposing the first text from the story to the learners, the teacher introduces the story to them by presenting some main themes. This could be done by demonstrating some colorful humorous and attractive pictures using the smart board, wall posters or a projector.

Step 2 – Group work

The learners will be given a text along with the intended grammar exercises. The learners are divided up into small groups and each group is given the same text, for example, they will be

doing *Activity 3*. Together they should highlight the past simple verbs, explain what do they mean and act them out in front of the class.

Step 3 – Class work

To provide some variety, the teacher can suggest a whole class work. If *Activity 2* is in use, the teacher can be cool and play the most music liked by the learners, which the Gangnam Style by the South Korean musician PSY. This will make them titter and try to understand the teacher's purpose, and that would be listing the state and action verbs. For example when playing the song, the learners will be asked to look for action verbs, whereas there will be no music when looking for the state verbs.

Step 4 – Individual work

Depending on the time left for the end of class and the learners' abilities, the teacher will decide whether to assign the individual work as class or homework, which will be graded. *Activity 1* is the suggested activity to be done individually, thus, after the teacher corrects every learner's work, he or she may decide how many more lesson(s) do the learners need in order to distinguish between the regular and the irregular past verbs.

Step 5 – Feedback

This step varies from one lesson to another depending on the norm of the class. Feedback is usually done after evaluating particular learners' work, whether, written audial or orally. According to Wilbert, Grosche, Gerdes (2010), the individual norm of reference provides beneficial instructional methods since it allows the learners to self-evaluate themselves in the classrooms. In other words, the exercises suggested in this paper all trigger self-motivation among the learners because such action leads to high competency and encourages them to evaluate themselves. Thus, based on these learning strategies, the teacher comments on what have been performed by the learners, and tries to create other self-motivated exercises to allow the learners to see their own work and to learn from their mistakes before the teacher invites them to any graded work. However, it is recommended using a variety of learning strategies that account different level of understanding. For example, *Activities 4* and *5* were not practiced in previous classes, so the teacher may use them in the next class to reinforce the learners' grammar comprehension before wrapping up this lesson or evaluating them. In this case, the teacher would be providing a genuine feedback that would fairly reveal what the learners have gained, misunderstood and how to run the next class(es).

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that teaching the regular and the irregular past verbs through literature can help bridge the cultural gap between the ESL learners and the target language community. Moreover, Ömer and Ali (2011) argue that using literature in ESL classrooms has advantages:

- That students learn that the target culture is a cause for them to learn the target language;
- Although course books used in foreign language education contain so-called logical examples from daily life, these examples can be perceived by students as fictional ones. In this context, learners can associate language forms and its abstract voices with natural persons and places by learning target languages' culture;

- Cultural studies not only increase students' concerns on target language's country but also raise students' motivation towards learning;
- Teaching cultural features in education plays an important role in general education process of students as well as its advantages for foreign language education at the same time. With cultural studies, students can learn the target country's history, geography, cuisine and etc.

These points emphasize on the fact that learners get the opportunity to acquire the language more effectively as they gain vicarious understanding of the culture of the language and learn to act in accordance with its norms and potentials during their growing years. The paper has emphasized that literature offers learners an entertaining and practical method of acquiring the lesson without the need of going through a prolonging series of intensive grammar lessons. Moreover, literature shows how language and its cultural features interact as well as providing the learners with examples of social roles such as the performances done for *Activity 3*. Not to mention, literature allows learners to think critically and to analyze characters, events and speeches that will steer them to extrinsically motivated learners as they proceed with their studies.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland offers a great deal of grammar exercises that a teacher can use from many other texts for other lessons such as the past continuous, the past simple vs. the past continuous, modals, infinitives and the passives. Naturally, as the learners acquire several lessons from the same story, they will be enriched with the culture of the target language leading to stronger communicative approaches. Moreover, the teacher may look for other stories that are rich in particular grammar exercises of the targeted lessons, and by enabling the learners to indirectly experience the foreign culture, the teacher can also experience their pros and cons to evaluate how the successive lessons should be.

Teachers are required to be in a good stand as they are the grammar teachers, cultural mediators and assessors. The teacher must act according to the levels of the learners and present the materials in ways that may suit them best, so the texts and the accompanied pictures need to be carefully selected to teach them on what can be clearly explained. However, this does not mean that they cannot perceive texts that are filled with sophisticated lexical items or show depth of analyses. The teacher can motivate the learners to advance their learning abilities to the level of the complexity of the language as they proceed with the text-in-story exercises. Nevertheless, choosing the right text for a particular exercise will positively busy the learners as they engage themselves with the language. Thus, a teacher will have done more than what it is expected from young ESL learners to acquire by bridging their cultural awareness and language abilities in a mutual harmonic relationship.

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